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Translation of poetry as homicide, with reference to Anna Akhmatova's 'Last Toast'

Dissertation: Creative Writing (SLL5004W)

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree of
Masters in Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities
University of Cape Town

September 2012

DECLARATION

I declare that this work has not previously been submitted in whole or in part for the award of any degree. It is my own work, and any contributions to and quotations in this dissertation have been cited and referenced.

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ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: Translation of poetry as homicide, with reference to Anna Akhmatova's 'Last Toast'

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of **Masters in Creative Writing (SLL5004W)** at the University of Cape Town, September 2012.

The objective of this dissertation is to provide a critical examination of poetry translation, using as a framework the notion that translation of poetry is comparable to an act of murder or homicide. Constructs pertaining to detective fiction are used as a basis to expose critical theories and commentary on poetry translation, which validate the comparison, taking into account the integrity of the poetic text, the context in which it exists, and the identity (constructed or real) of the poet. Four published translations, by different authors, into English of Anna Akhmatova's poem *Posledniy tost* ('The Last Toast') are analysed in detail to demonstrate the validity of the argument and to attempt to review and quantify the loss of a poem's essential and vital qualities as a result of translation.

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1 PREFACE

1.1 OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

This study is, in some measure, an introspective and critical evaluation of my own approach to translating poetry. It does not attempt to make a value judgement of the translations that it examines, but is rather a critical and comprehensive appreciation of the work of the translators, the challenges they have faced, the strategies they have adopted and the choices they have made. The study does not attempt to add to the already considerable canon of discussion on how and why to translate poetry; rather, it brings some of the polemics that those learned texts raise into direct conversation with a set of artefacts, all products of the translation act on a single original text.

I have chosen one of Anna Akhmatova's famous texts as the subject of the study, for several reasons:

- that many translations of the text are readily available in many languages and idioms (including musical interpretation);
- my personal fondness for the poem, which has haunted me since I first encountered it in 1994 as a student of Russian language and literature;
- its Slavic idiom, as far removed from the target language of the translation as I am comfortable with, and therefore offering a high degree of contrast with which to work.

It is in the spirit of the systematic application of established theory and practice to comparative critical analysis that I undertake and submit this work, hopefully in a way that will inform, challenge - and perhaps even shock - those engaged in the refined and gallant art of poetry translation.

1.2 METHOD AND APPROACH TAKEN

The key contention of this review is that the translation of poetry may be compared with the taking of human life. It sets out to examine what the two acts have in common, with the purpose of examining the strategies and tactics employed by translators of poetry. After an introduction and expansion, a comparative analysis is undertaken of four translations of a single source text, to discern the relative approaches of the four translators to specific challenges posed by the source text in the target language.

Against a background of poetry translation theory, the construct of homicide is extended to the analysis. This method provides a useful framework for analytical and comparative argument, highlighting structural, affective and communicative differences between the source text and the translated artefacts. The tactical elements of translation are systematically linked to a component of homicide, through techniques similar to those employed by a crime investigator or prosecutor, not for the sake of accusing the translators of wrongdoing, but rather as an academic exercise that demonstrates and examines the multiple challenges presented by translating a cultural artefact that embeds meaning in language and in form.

Hopefully without compromising academic rigour, the superficial argument of homicide is presented in the manner of an investigator in detective fiction. This conceit, being by nature artificial and contrived, brings its own challenges, but also some fortuitous associations and discoveries that enrich the analysis and research. The most obvious challenge is that the tone of detective fiction and the tone of academic research are not easily reconcilable. This dissertation tests the boundary between the two, but any apparent flippancy arising should not compromise the spirit of scholastic discipline with which the study is undertaken.

The association of translation with homicide is premised on two attributes of poetry: poetry as life/living, and poetry as body. While these attributes may be abstract in their application to poetry, there is no lack of authoritative material to back up either premise.

1.3 SUMMARY OF REVIEW

Section 2 of this dissertation presents the argument for viewing translation of poetry as equivalent to homicide. The constructs of detective fiction provide a framework upon which the equivalence is proposed and analysed: the source poem (as body and as life-force) as the victim of a violent act and a moral offence; the means by which it is perpetrated; and the motives for doing so. Some consideration is given to the idea that a poem is a physical embodiment of the poet, forcing the syllogism that disturbing the physical integrity of a poem is tantamount to wounding the poet's body. In mitigation or defence of the act, the justifications for translating poetry are considered. Finally, in this section, there is a short discussion on the logical and moral ambiguities inherent in the translation of poetry

Continuing the theme of detective investigation, Section 3 applies the concepts outlined in Section 2 to a comparison of four translations into English of a single Russian poem, Anna Akhmatova's *Posledniy tost*. This section follows the path of an investigation and prosecution, collecting and examining evidence, and then presenting it for review. Specific differences and commonalities between the four translations are highlighted, and the translators' tactics for tackling specific difficulties arising in the source text are compared. In a final finesse at the summation, the detective/prosecutor admits his guilt at having committed the same crime for which he has presented evidence against the accused, and presents the evidence of his own translation act upon the same poem.

The conclusion critically reviews the approach taken, summarises the findings of the study, and suggests opportunities and indications for further study on the topic.

1.4 A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The difficulty of translating meaning between languages is cognate with the difficulty of approximating the sounds of one alphabet and language in another. Standards and fashions vary in the transliteration of Cyrillic text into the Latin alphabet, giving rise to inconsistencies in the spelling of some Slavic names mentioned in this study. While I have settled on the transliteration of "Akhmatova", I have retained other transliterations (such as "Achmatova")

in direct quotations and citations. The same may be seen to be applied to other names such as Mandelstam/Mandel'shtam or Tolstoy/Tolstoj/Tolstoi, and to equivalences of proper nouns, such as Lev/Leo, where my selection of a particular alternative is informed either by popular modern usage or by personal taste.

The transliteration of the text of the poem 'The Last Toast' is my own, and is not informed by any specific academic method. In some places I have chosen to settle for a lexical, rather than a tonal, accuracy, except where I feel that the importance of a tonal deviation in usage overrides the lexical importance of a sound ("kh" rather than "g" in the transliteration of Бор). I have retained the convention of preceding soft vowels with an "i" or "y", in a way that is lexically comfortable in English, and replacing the "soft sign" with an apostrophe.

*Other sins only speak; murder shrieks out:
The element of water moistens the earth,
But blood flies upwards, and bedews the heavens.*

- John WEBSTER, *The Duchess of Malfi*, Act IV, sc. ii¹

2 THE BODY IN THE LIBRARY²

2.1 A BODY OF EVIDENCE

All good detective stories must have a body (Van Dine)³. We have a body. It is in a library. Not quite a dead body. In fact, the body that we have is still very much alive. Let us rather say that we have a victim. We know the identity of the victim. It is a body.

We know that a crime has been committed. There is evidence of that.

All good detective stories leave the identity of the perpetrator of the crime secret until the penultimate chapter. In such detective stories, as the post-Structuralists would have it⁴, the identity of the perpetrator is gradually constructed by *semes* accumulating on what starts out as a zero, an empty shell, a nucleation point. As the detective story progresses, more and

¹ (Webster, 1964)

² With apologies to Agatha Christie.

³ 'There simply must be a corpse in a detective novel, and the deader the corpse the better. No lesser crime than murder will suffice. Three hundred pages is far too much pother for a crime other than murder. After all, the reader's trouble and expenditure of energy must be rewarded.'

⁴ (Barthes, 1975)

more semes aggregate on that nucleation point, until the identity of the criminal is complete and irrefutable. Therein lies the *jouissance*⁵ of the text, the thrill that the reader experiences when the detective deftly slots that last critical seme into place, and we know with a smug and final certainty Who *Dunn* It.

The detective story with which we are now engaged has multiple perpetrators, and we know who they are. In this detective story the reader does not have the satisfaction of being able to, with a smirk and a telling gaze, call out “Aha! It was Miss Scarlett in the Ballroom with the Candlestick!”⁶ No, we already have our Miss Scarletts, we already have our Ballroom (in this case, a Library). But it is the Candlestick that interests us.

Before we get to the instruments of the crime, let us examine The Locale: a library. A good setting for a crime, and a classic one. The library, with its mind-numbingly large collection of semes and memes and intertextualities, all catalogued and referenced into a grand repository of knowledge and delight. To suffer and bleed in such exalted company is no less than an honour. To commit a crime surrounded by the greatest crimes, from adultery to war to persecution to plagiarism, must certainly bring with it its own thrill. It is in the library that victim, perpetrator, accomplices, witnesses, evidence and detective all find ourselves, drawn together by an event that taxes both morality and the “little grey cells”⁷.

In this particular case the library is not necessarily the silent, fusty depository ruled over by a spectacled dowager in sensible tweeds and brogues, smelling of foxed paper and mildew, but a place altogether more amorphous. In fact, it is not in a single library that the crime has taken place, but in many more than we know of or can count.

⁵ (Barthes, 1975)

⁶ (Pratt, 1947): Miss Scarlett, the Ballroom and the Candlestick are entities from the board game ‘Cluedo’

⁷ (Christie, 1975)

The crime itself is being committed and re-committed perpetually and seemingly at random all over the globe, but it is always in a library, and it is always in a library that the evidence presents itself, as I do for you now, here:

THE FINAL TOAST

I drink to the house past all repair,
To the evil of my lifetime, to
The isolation that we share,
I also drink to you;

To lips betraying me with lies,
To the world, severe and grave,
To the deadly coldness of the eyes,
To God, who did not save.

(Akhmatova & Reeser, 2008)

2.2 THE MORAL OFFENCE: THE NATURE OF THE CRIME

2.2.1 THE HAMMER AND THE KNIFE

There may appear at face value to be very little out of place in the evidence just presented. To the unenlightened eye it appears as a perfectly ordinary, even a good, poem. There is nothing untoward in its structure, its content. The occasional clumsiness may easily be passed over as the work of a competent, if not expert, poet.

In fact, ‘The Final Toast’ as we see it here is a translation of a poem by the great Russian poet of the Acmeist school, Anna Andreevna Akhmatova, who lived from 1889 to 1966. Despite being the only poem that Akhmatova is known to have written in 1934, *Posledniy tost*, ‘The Final Toast’ (alternatively known as ‘The Last Toast’, ‘A Final Toast’ ‘Last Toast’, etc.) is

popular and canonical, having been included in school syllabi in the old Soviet bloc and translated into many languages.

The particular crime with which we are now faced is one that hides easily in its own casual pretension. But it is no secret that the perpetrator of a crime wishes to be discovered, no matter how cleverly they have covered their tracks. The crime of which I speak is the Translation of Poetry.

It is a crime so common as to have become commonplace, even admired by the most morally upstanding of us all.

We are not dealing here with wanton assassination as in the case of the death of the great poet Federico García Lorca, although Lorca's poetry has also suffered the same fate of translation, as noted by Roy Campbell in *The Martyrdom of F. Garcia Lorca*:

Not only did he lose his life
By shots assassinated:
But with a hammer and a knife
Was after that - translated.⁸

In the case of the killing of Lorca (the man, the poet), it was the taking of a human life, a corporeal death by firing squad. What concerns us is the "hammer and a knife" death that Campbell so eloquently describes.

Campbell's hammer and knife are worth examining for clues. This is an ignominious death, unglamorous and clumsy, but the tools in question are pertinent. Both tools make reference to the translator's art, which requires cutting, pruning, slicing and stabbing (or "taking a stab at") as well as a considerable amount of bludgeoning, beating and whacking or, if one will,

⁸ (Campbell, 1955)

“going at, hammer and tongs”. The activity is at once brutal and delicate, requiring the gross skill of wielding a heavy blunt object and the deftness of the forensic pathologist, with instruments and insights as keen as scalpel and microscope. Above all, it is not an easy death for the perpetrator or the victim; it is violent.

There is an acknowledgement in Campbell’s lines of the moral reprehensibility (“not only” assassination, but, it is implied, worse) of any translation of poetry, including his own (he had himself translated many of Lorca’s poems). The coarseness of the method of the second murder, with ordinary items ready to hand⁹ and intended for a different purpose, reduces the act to something almost undue, unwarranted and even less excusable than assassination, which is also an atrocity, but justifiable by political expediency.

But the key difference between the assassination and translation is that the first is a violation of the physical person and the second is violence toward the poet’s corpus.

2.2.2 THE VIOLENT ACT

So how may the act (or the artefact) of translation be construed as murder? After all, the original still lives on. Indeed it does, but it has been supplanted by something that the reader of the translation may take to be the real, living thing. The original poem lives on with the constant presence of at least one soulless *Doppelgänger*. Like zombies, translations of poems walk the earth, passing at face value for reasonable simulacra of their original vital sources.

⁹ Readiness to hand here making specific reference to Heidegger’s concept of *zuhandenheit*, (Collins & Selina, 2006) wherein the tool comes into being through its being put to purpose, rather than in its abstract potential to be put to purpose or even the purpose for which it was originally constructed. What we wish to highlight here is the disjuncture between abstract purpose, or presence at hand – *vorhandenheit* – and actual application, even if that actual application is metaphorical.

The compulsion to translate (poetry) is as unavoidable as the compulsion to murder, however horrific the act and its consequences may be. Murder is always justifiable in the mind of the perpetrator, and the translation of poetry, as we shall see, is justifiable in the name of supposedly noble causes. Many poets, having been deserted by their muse, have resorted to translation of poetry. Ezra Pound is a notable case of a poet whose corpus, canonical as it is, relies heavily on translation. Akhmatova was herself a frequent translator of poetry (though her competence therein is not considered here), largely because producing (or at least publishing) her own original work was forbidden her for periods of her life.

Lauren Leighton, in 'Translation as a Derived Art' (Leighton, 1990), makes the case for translation as an art, and many murderers will do the same. There is something creative, the murderer will argue, in the destructive act of murder: beyond the act of *creating a new thing* (a corpse) from raw materials (a living person), the murder would typically be executed according to one or more various methods that entail a degree of meritorious mastery: accuracy, skill, cunning, planning, inspiration and flair.

However, as Leighton goes on to observe, translation "is not only an approximate art and a contradictory art, it is, like all art, imperfect" (Leighton, p. 453). Likewise, urban wisdom has it that the perfect murder¹⁰ is desirable, but impossible to realise.

Another concept relevant to the argument is Poetry as Life, as embraced by Meschonnic: "Poetry turns everything into life. It is that form of life that turns everything into language. It does not come to us unless language itself has become a form of life." (Meschonnic & Bedetti, 1988, p. 90). Meschonnic argues that poetry is the noble carrier of a verve or vital energy, indistinguishable from life-force and transcendent of the mere insensible world of signs. If this is so, then meddling with a poem's "rhyme" (by which he means not only assonance, but also metre, prosody and all of the other elements that distinguish poetry from

¹⁰ For the purposes of this study, the definition of a "perfect murder" is immaterial.

prose) - as one is required to do when translating a poem – is tantamount to diminishing the life-force of the poem.

Meschonnic goes on to claim that “[t]he relation between rhyme and life carries poetry away from aesthetics. It makes poetry pass to a world other than the one of the sign, where aesthetics has its discourse. Rhyme is an ethic.” (Meschonnic & Bedetti, 1988, p. 107). If rhyme is not only a vigour, but an ethic too, then the massacre of rhyme by translation becomes an ethical transgression, a moral affront that is not just an aesthetic reworking: “The traditional discordance between translation and the poem is that of a passivity against an activity. The whole aestheticized, moralized into faithfulness and transparency. Meaning, against rhyme and life.” (Meschonnic & Bedetti, 1988, p. 98). In other words, we may conceive of the original poem as an active entity, while the translation is meaning robbed of essence, meaning for meaning’s sake, and meaning alone. The result, a gilded sepulchre by vice of its mere existence, cannot help but retrospectively rob the original of some of the original’s moment, because all texts interact in dialogue with another. Violence is therefore seen to be done not only in the translation’s existence *in sui*, but in and upon the original that no longer stands alone as unique and whole, atomically pure.

But then are we not to consider in equal measure the violence of poetry itself? Roman Jakobson described literary discourse as “organized violence committed on ordinary speech” (Jakobson, 1959). If poetry is indeed the noblest and most distilled form of literary discourse, then the violence of poetry toward ordinary speech can only be an intense violence, supremely organised. Meschonnic, again, recalls that “[r]hyme is a cry because it cries a truth” (Meschonnic & Bedetti, 1988, p. 104). Would it be facile to posit a violent act done to an already violent act as being doubly violent?

“Nabokov cited in Giblett (1987) compares poetry translation to beheading, insulting the dead, and a parrot’s scream.” (Dastjerdi, March 2008, p. 11). That Vladimir Nabokov was himself a polyglot, with exceptional command of three languages, provides some authority to his argument. The nature of the crime is threefold:

- Beheading implies the removal of the cognitive and intellectual character of the body, resulting in death. This is the form of execution traditionally reserved in Western culture for traitors: those who have sought to place their interests above those of the ultimate worldly authority; those whose crime is capitally intellectual. The metaphor resists being mixed (wherein the poet of the source may be interpreted as the traitor) by its application to the character or robbing the victim of its expressive and intellectual faculties. Both treason and execution are committed by the translator.
- Insulting the dead is an act rendered criminal by the fact that the dead are not able to defend against the insult. The original poem (dead, because it has been beheaded) is an inviolable whole, complete in the same way as the life of the deceased person is complete. It is defenceless against translation, and the insult is a misrepresentation, an assassination of character.
- The scream of a parrot is meaningless. The mimic bird gives an impression of intelligence purely through the accident of being able to simulate human sounds, but it is unable to grasp the full semantic content of its utterances. The vital, primal scream of a poem is rendered by translation as the scream of the murder victim, the scream that is curtailed and made meaningless to itself by the cession of life.

The violence that is translation of poetry is insidious. The translation proposes an alternative existence for the original poem, but an existence deprived of its life force, of exactly the character (cognitive, vital, and meaningful) that gives it its integrity.

2.2.3 “LEBT DIE ACHMATOWA NOCH?”

“Roman Timenchik cites a poem by an East German writer who visited the USSR in 1955, which consists only of a long list of contemporary Russian poets interrupted by the refrain ‘Und lebt die Achmatowa noch?’” (Wachtel, 2010, p. 314) ¹¹.

The irony of this rhetorical question is perhaps more poignant than one may think. Although by 1955 the constraints on Anna Akhmatova’s publication had loosened somewhat, the silence of her voice through the official channels was noticeable, and there had been no official announcement from the Soviet authorities of her death. It is conceivable, then, that people “on the outside” genuinely did wonder whether or not Anna Andreevna had come through the privations and strictures of her situation alive. Even if not through death by misadventure or assassination, suicide would not have been inconceivable in Akhmatova’s circumstances (and indeed her contemporary Marina Tsvetaeva had taken her own life in 1941) ¹².

¹¹ The poem most likely referred to is Adolf Endler’s poem ‘Besuch aus Moskau 1955’
Besuch aus Moskau 1955

Fadejew! – Paustowski! – Korneitschuk!
Issakowski! – Bashan! – Schtipatschtow!
Ketlinskaja! – Kassyl! – Katajew!

»Ach, lebt die Achmatowa noch?«
(...)

Perwomaiski! – Fedin! – Lukonin!
Ja, sie lebt!, nun hören Sie doch!
Assejew! – Ashajew! – Fadejew!

»Sie lebt, die Achmatowa, noch?«

Adolf Endler (1999), *Der Pudding der Apokalypse. Gedichte 1963 – 1998*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, p. 68.

¹² Kaun mentions that the “premature death of a poet had become, one might say, a tradition in Russia.” (Kaun, 1943, p. 54)

The question of the continued existence of “die Achmatowa” is pointed at multiple interpretations of existence, beyond the breathing body. None of the poets listed in the poem had or have enjoyed anything like the popularity of Akhmatova. The question, then, is targeted at the survival of a certain quality of poetry (the so-called Silver Age) in an environment where the mediocrity of Soviet-approved poets still dominated.

The syntax of “die Achmatowa” reinforces a relevant peculiarity: although preceding a name with a definite article is not unusual in German, Akhmatova’s name is the only one in the poem to be so treated. The person of “die Achmatowa” is therefore metonymically the work of Akhmatova as well as that of the poets and poetry of the Silver Age. A considerable burden of existence, it must be admitted, but then a threat to that existence is a threat not only to the body and the future work of the poet, but a threat to the past work of that poet, a threat to the poet’s potential for posterity, and a threat to an entire school of great poetry.

If translation of poetry is a form of homicide, then attack on the person of the poet must be taken into account as much as the poet’s oeuvre in constituting the victim of the violence of translation. Many would assert that the poet’s product is an externalisation or realisation of the poet’s being in the same way that the physical body of a person would be the realisation of the person’s soul. The notion of art product being a type of incorporation has resonances in psychoanalytic, Marxist and feminist literary theory, and cannot be ignored.

Gumilev, Akhmatova’s first husband and the key mover in the Acmeist movement, proposed in his essay ‘The Reader’ an “organic” interpretation of the Acmeist ideal, in which the categories of poetic discourse have equivalences in anatomy: stylistics as flesh, composition as bone structure, eidology as the nervous system, and phonetics as the circulatory system (Doherty, 1995, p. 119).

Gumilev’s equivalence brings a fresh anatomical perspective to the construct of a poet’s poetry as an embodiment or incorporation. The metonymic construct by which various theories of discourse interpret discourse as a subjective externalisation or embodiment of self, or posit the construction of the self and assertion of physical presence *in* discourse, predicate subjectivity on an abstract materialisation of self that has little to do with anatomy (besides

the physiology of vocal cords or other agents of discourse). The Acmeist's stance is more pragmatic, aligning more closely the physical phenomena of poetic discourse with the phenomenon of organic anatomy. In this light the act of violence on poetry is not merely the act of violence on an abstract externalisation, but on a true, living and organic body, alike in all respects to the physical body of a person.

It is significant in this context that one of the alternative names given to Acmeism was Adamism. While the term was gradually rejected by Acmeists, the adamic idealisation of man – constructed first in physical form from earth and then having the qualities of life blown into him by The Word - holds well for a material-organic view of poetic product.

In Akhmatova's case specifically, separation of poet from oeuvre is rather problematic. Through her own poetry, she has been accused more than once of "self-mythologising" (Harrington, 2006, p. 44), fuelling her public image as a martyr, or as having been resurrected. Rosslyn also refers to Akhmatova's "tendency to build myth from the material of reality" (Rosslyn, 1979, p. 884). Some critics have claimed that Akhmatova not only survived and trumped Stalin, but constructed expedient and clever strategies to adapt profitably to Stalinism, going so far as to position herself successfully as "the only female victim of Soviet cultural politics" (Rylkova, 2010, p. 327). The view of Akhmatova as an incorrigible egotist is unfair where that view ignores the Acmeist perspective of the poet having to, as Gumilev insisted, "invent himself". Even accounting for a personal affinity, and possibly even a shared psychopathology, between Akhmatova and Gumilev, one hears echoes in Georgy Ivanov's description of Akhmatova's first husband: "And he did invent himself, and in such earnest that for most of the people who knew him... his mask became his living self. Only a few close friends knew the other Gumilev, who was not a hero and not an African hunter."¹³

¹³ 'On Gumilev, *The Third Rome*, (Tenafly, NJ, 1987), p.246 in (Doherty, 1995, p. 175)

Kirsten Painter compares Akhmatova to T. S. Eliot in their styles of embodiment of self in poetry, stating that both

utilize body language to accentuate the contradictions between spoken and unspoken thoughts and to imply a narrative that lies beyond the frame. ... In their hands this method becomes a means of tempering the expression of the poetic self. By emphasizing concrete objects and especially parts of the body, while leaving much of the context unexplained, they imbue the palpable detail with a pointed, emotional charge. The poetic self becomes objectified, as if it were just another object among the objects of the poem, and the inner world of the self is revealed indirectly, through external gestures and things. (Painter, 2009, p. 53)

However revisionist the more recent criticism of Akhmatova's works, it remains clear that her subjectivity, or insertion of self into her corpus, went beyond the thematic. The content of *Posledniy tost* is particularly relevant to this assertion: it is either a genuinely damning account of the effects of physical clampdown (of which Akhmatova was a frequent, if mostly indirect, victim through her husbands, lovers, son and friends being sent to gulags) and effective silencing (or more accurately, muting), or it is a passive-aggressive call for pity at her lot as a poet who resisted the call to exile, either through love of her homeland or as a source of notoriety on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Self-mythologising transcends Akhmatova's descriptions of self as narrator or subject in her poetry. That she chose as her poet's pseudonym her grandmother's distinctive Tartar surname that linked her to Genghis Khan (Polianov, 1994) is significant. Although the choice of a pseudonym was at her father's behest¹⁴, not wishing the family name Gorenko to be associated with poetry, the pseudonym places the poet in rarefied company, before the genius of her work is even recognised.

¹⁴ Josef Brodsky, in his Introduction to the Lyn Coffin translations (Akhmatova & Coffin, 1983, p. xiii)

Akhmatova's work is distinctive from that of her contemporaries in allegedly containing a strong personal aspect. According to Wladimir Weidle, "...the intimate conversational quality [was] unprecedented in Russian poetry. It was a feminine voice and the themes of her poems were largely feminine, even girlish. Their lyricism was so immediate, so personal that many a line could have been extracted from letters or diaries." (Weidle, 1969, p. 12).

Psychologically, according to Nadezhda Mandelstam, Akhmatova was preoccupied with the double: "It was something rooted in her psychology, a result of her attitude to people – in whom, as in mirrors, she always sought her own reflection. She looked at people as one might look into a mirror, hoping to find her own likeness and seeing her 'double' in everybody." (Akhmatova & Thomas, 1988).

Some of Akhmatova's biographers make reference to her heavy drinking during her time in Tashkent in the war (Rylkova, 2010, p. 339). *Posledniy tost* can convincingly be interpreted as a (self-) justification for the amount of alcohol consumed in the poem, (repeatedly, since each entity drunk to surely merits a drink of its own). This reading simultaneously mythologises the poet as a woman who has resorted to alcohol to dull the pain of an existence made unbearable by others (lovers and politicians), and as a super-woman rising above the middle-class and moralistic concerns of sobriety. The half-nun-half-whore epithet (Akhmatova & Thomas, 1988) applied to Akhmatova by the perpetrator of Stalin's cultural purges, Andrei Zhdanov, reaches a kind of epiphany here. The reader's shock and pity are core to the poem and should find their way into a translated text, if the translation is deemed to be successful.

One may further read references into *Posledniy tost* to Akhmatova's alleged lesbian affairs (especially in the Tashkent "heavy drinking" period, although these happened after the poem was written in 1935). The horror experienced by her biographer friend Ostrovskaia in Akhmatova's genuine or contrived advances is referred to in allegations such as: "She bares her breast, sighs, kisses me *on the lips with her sharp stinging lips* – the way she once used to kiss her lovers no doubt." (Rylkova, 2010, pp. 339-340) (my emphasis). Is this the pair of betraying or betrayed lips to which Akhmatova refers so obscurely and ambiguously in

Posledniy tost? If so, this makes the case for the ambiguity inherent in the source text to be faithfully rendered as ambiguous in any translation.

Harrington suggests several personas for the first-person narrator or implicit narrator of Akhmatova's poems: these include the pre-revolutionary, post-revolutionary, wife, mother, etc., and in her early poems as standing both as an observer and participant in the action (Harrington, 2006, p. 56). Translating the poetry of Akhmatova is not just the negation of the life of the original poem, but the murder of a reality: the reality in which Akhmatova was something else (if, as Harrington suggests, Akhmatova was indeed preoccupied with the alternative existences that she may have, may not have, or even did, experience).

Analysis of a poet's oeuvre frequently refers to the poet's "voice". The concept is difficult to break down into constituent components, such as distinctive or repeated diction and syntax, dominant moods and themes, recurring elements of form, or tacit or explicit presence as narrator or observer. We do not intend to tackle the challenges of defining poetic voice here, but it is sufficient to observe that translation effectively silences the poet of the original work. Leighton admits that a "whole translation [...] will have a life of its own, which is the voice of the translator" (Leighton, 1990, p. 447). Attributing life to the translation, as Leighton does, subtracts some of the life from the original text by replacing the poet's true voice.

Translation of poetry, then, robs poetry of its life-force. But it leaves the original intact; a corpse that still appears to be living and breathing, and to many intents still is. Many, seeing the original, would not know that it has been mutilated, because the evidence is not visible to them. Even those consuming the translation are seldom even aware of the crime to which they are witness, as many translations present themselves as definitive, plausible and competent in portraying a "faithful" facsimile of the original. The public that eagerly consumes translated poetry (particularly in popular domains such as that of Pablo Neruda or Wisława Szymborska) naively believes that it is feeling the full impact of the original, thus doing the original poet's skill and work a woeful disservice.

We must nevertheless be wary of falling into the trap of art's mimesis: a painted portrait of a person is not a murder of that person. One may recall the reaction of so-called primitive

peoples to cameras in the not too distant past, terrified that the capturing of their likeness in a box would rob them of their soul, and forbidding that their photographs be taken. But the translation of poetry, however artful, is rarely intended as, and not always worthy of being, noted as a work of art that stands on its own. In the case of portraiture, the subject is one (a living person) whose life essence is predicated on the vital signs, whereas in the case of translation of a written work, the life force exists in a metaphysical realm.

In art one may not only portray life, but also death. A still life study or a life drawing depicts life at a particular moment, forever fixed in art, while the subjects continue to live or to decompose independently, eventually to die.

The death of Akhmatova herself is referred to by Rylkova as being portrayed in almost fetishistic style by one of the film biographers, Aranovich. She continues in noting that other film documentaries about Akhmatova “actually start by showing her grave, as if to underscore the fact that the object of their representations is not recoverable, which, according to Eugenio Donato, is a precondition for any representation: ‘The corpse [is] a necessary condition for the logic of any representational system [and it] will ... always remain in a relationship of absolute Otherness to such a system.’” (Rylkova, 2010, p. 352)¹⁵

Translation of poetry is therefore by nature an atrocity in presenting itself as a simulacrum, not only of outward form in the way that a portrait does, but in hoping to capture and transmit some of the life essence that supplements that outward form.

¹⁵ cit.: Eugenio Donato, *The Script of Decadence: Essays on the Fictions of Flaubert and the Poetics of Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 199.

2.2.4 JUSTIFYING THE ATROCITY

"As to the atrocities of my translation," Ezra Pound warned, "all that can be said in excuse is that they are, I hope, for the most part intentional, and committed with the aim of driving the reader's perception further into the original than it would without them have penetrated." (Pound: 172) (Leighton, 1990, p. 447)

It is certain that it is impossible to translate any poem fully from one language into another. I had hoped to avoid using the famous quote by Robert Frost that in this type of discussion has ascended to the status of cliché: "Poetry is what gets lost in translation." As with all clichés, the fundamental truth of the statement is undeniable. However, persisting in the spirit of the cliché, the famous attribution is also a misquotation. Frost's actual statement was: "I could define poetry this way: It is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation." (Barry, 1973, p. 159).¹⁶

Translation of poetry cannot then succeed in the same way as original poetry. If the task is so unsuccessful, then why do translations of poetry abound?

The motives for translating poetry are legion, and a translator's reasons for doing so must be taken into account when considering the crime. Schools of thought in the translation of poetry generally make a distinction between the literal and literary translation. While the literal translation aims for precision in translating almost word-for-word the original, the literary translation of poetry seeks to replicate for the reader some of the magic that the reader of the

¹⁶ Not only is the frequent alleged aphorism by Frost often misquoted, it is also generally interpreted out of context. Frost was not speaking of verse specifically, but of the poetry of language: "Let's put it this way, that prose and verse are alike in having high poetic possibilities of idea, and free verse is anywhere you want to be between those two things, prose and verse. I like to say, guardedly, that I could define poetry this way: It is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation."

original would experience. The student of literature and the bored housewife have different reasons for reading poetry in translation, and these reasons must be accommodated by different techniques. A student conversant with the source language has a singular use for the type of translation offered, compared to the student aiming to gain an appreciation for the subtleties and nuances of a literature with which they are unaccustomed, or the dilettante wanting to know what the fuss is about, and attempting to gain a feel for the poet's use of prosody, image and style.

The simple trot, or dog-trot, translation of verse into expository prose generally has a poor academic and literary standing. Yet, of all the styles of poetry translation, it is the least insidious in that it does not attempt to pass itself off as verse, and therefore confesses up-front to the inadequacy of a language to say exactly what another language can, and of any writer to say exactly what another poet can.

Wholly accurate translation of verse (whether metered and rhymed, blank or free) is rendered impossible by the disequivalence of languages on many scores, the most obvious being:

- Rhythm: the rise and fall in pitch and volume of the spoken word, in conjunction with the relative speed at which syllables are uttered;
- Vocabulary and diction: Semantically, the inexactitude with which any word can be perfectly equivalent in meaning to a supposed synonym in another language;
- Sound texture: the proximity and regularity of speech elements such as aspirants, sibilants and plosives (including those vowels and consonants that languages simply do not share, a simple example of which is the unique click-sounding consonants of sub-Saharan Africa);
- Sound tone: the differing vowel sounds between languages;
- Regional and cultural aspects of figure and trope: The associations evoked by a single referent in a metaphor have vastly different connotations between cultures, and in different parts of the world. The moon or an acacia tree may have vastly contrasting associations, depending on which part of the world one is from, and the way one's language colours the words;

- Regional and cultural aspects of form: Even the sophisticated sonnet form takes on a different shape in different European countries and in different language traditions. The connotations of a particular form, aside from physical variations, may vary considerably from culture to culture, and from era to era.

As summarised by Dastjerdi: “The same meaning may be expressed in another language in quite a different grammatical or lexical form.” (Dastjerdi, March 2008, p. 9).

Needless to say, a “perfect” translation would mimic the sonority, rhythm, metre, elements of trope and other formal qualities of the source text, since each of these qualities should contribute to the creation of meaning, tacit or implicit, in the original poem.

Given its general density of metaphor relative to prose (by which we mean all forms of trope, and not necessarily metaphor in its strictest sense), poetry presents a set of problems to the translator that are not unique to the problems of translation of poetry, but that amplify the difficulties that arise in any translation. A translation of poetry can do no more than haplessly attempt to approximate the effects created by the original.

So what justifies this seemingly impossible and morally dubious endeavour of translating poetry?

The most obvious excuse for translating a poem would stem from demand. Those who have heard of a foreign-language poet being lauded for exceptional talent or insight would wish to be exposed to those rich cultural artefacts themselves. Barred by language from access to the poet’s genius, they seek out the second-best thing, which they hope will give them some inkling of the enrichment permitted to readers of the original works. Equally in this vein, someone who feels particularly moved by a work may deem it worthy of a broader audience, and therefore embark upon or commission a translation, so as to be able to share the experience more broadly.

The student or scholar of literature or of language has a particular set of demands of translated poetry: either as part of an effort to appreciate a corpus in its literary context, or as

an aid to learning a language. At a greater stretch, the enlightened cultural, anthropological or even the paleontological scholar may regard poetry as an artefact capable of revealing truths embedded in literary discourse, and may therefore require a translation.

Many a poet has resorted to translating the poetry of others (or even their own, as in the case of Breyten Breytenbach¹⁷). We know, for example, that Akhmatova translated poetry into Russian because she was prevented from publishing her own poetry, and desperately needed money, and possibly also a creative outlet.

Inspiration, or lack thereof, has been known to drive poets to the translation. Ezra Pound, quoted above, was a notorious offender by virtue of either seeking thematic or technical inspiration for his own writing or, having given up on struggling with writer's block and bypassing the muse's direct ministrations, simply using translation as a way to keep writing.

Christopher Whyte posits cultural nationalism as a motive for translating poetry (Whyte, 2000, p. 180), and argues that renewed interest in dying languages such as Scottish Gaelic, whether nostalgic or political, can be served by translating the poetry of that language. This view sees poetry as a vehicle of cultural and socio-political information, and of a particular language's continuous existence. Poetry may survive cultural repression of languages, if it is created as a form of political protest against that repression. As the language falls into disuse in common discourse, the poetry written in that language acts as a time capsule for language and ideas, but then requires translating so that the translation may be used as a learning tool for those wishing to learn the language or to study the culture embedded in its poetry.

The intimacy with the source text that is required to translate a poem exposes the translator to techniques, tropes, forms and locutions that may well be unfamiliar, thus augmenting the tools available to the poet. Similarly, hunting for the correct word or phrase that can most

¹⁷ (Breytenbach, 2009)

accurately reflect the diction, tone and style of the original, *le mot presque juste*, can lead to some serendipitous and inspiring discoveries. To the translator, the source text is left raw, exposed, stripped, its every flaw and weakness naked: a poet may learn much about form and technique from such a close and intimate reading. In my own experience, I have been startled to encounter, in the work of established poets whose poetry I have attempted to translate, inadequacies, inconsistencies and gauche constructions that surely cannot be deliberate. Likewise, I have had the fortune of happening upon felicities that would otherwise have escaped my attention. Both findings can, applied appropriately, add to my critical faculties and arsenal of tools and effects as a poet.

Not all justifications and reasons for translating poetry are covered here, but this exposition is sufficient to our purpose of revealing that justifications vary, and that the strategies and methods for committing the crime may be equally varied.

There is almost general consensus among theorists that anyone embarking on the successful translation of poetry must be a poet (Eco, 2004; 2003). If the result is a competent poem, that does not mean that it fully retains the qualities of the source work, but the likelihood of a competent interpretation, and a competent re-rendering of the original, is increased. A poet, accustomed to working with language, would most likely have a clearer idea than the layman of the original poet's intent in choosing a particular form, turn of phrase or diction. Likewise, they would hopefully be more competent in rendering in the target language forms, turns of phrase and diction that responsibly reflect those of the original verse. That a thorough knowledge of the literary traditions and conventions of the source text and target reader is required goes without saying, even if these are to be largely ignored by an uneducated audience.

Even the dog-trot translation cannot adequately succeed if the translator does not have more than a passing knowledge of the techniques of poetic discourse and the cultural context of the original poet, otherwise nuances may be misinterpreted, passed over or misrepresented.

Ezra Pound, in the quote at the beginning of this section, makes the case for apparent misrepresentation. The atrocities to which he refers are not so much the atrocity of which we

are accusing him (namely, the mere fact of having translated poetry), but rather of having translated the original with seemingly inaccurate diction, form or style. Pound maintains that these apparent inaccuracies are in fact intended to bring the affective force of the original into a sharper focus than if his diction in the translation had sought semantic equivalence of a more obvious order.

It is possible that this justification offered by Pound is intended to cover up his feeling of inadequacy at his, or his target language's, being able to provide a translation that accurately reflects the power of the original. Whatever the reason, his activity is recognisable as an atrocity, justified by whatever argument.

2.3 CONSIDERATIONS ON JUDGEMENT

The need or demand for translated poetry arises in differing situations, and before a judgement can be passed on a translation, the mitigating circumstances and factors must be taken into account. Is a relativistic judgement then necessary, or is it expedient?

Nida (1964) categorizes translation into two types: formal translation vs. dynamic translation. In formal translation, he asserts, the way meaning was conveyed is shown, that is, the style of the original is preserved. Dynamic translation, he believes, is a translation principle according to which translators seek to translate the meaning of the original in such a way that the [target language] wording will trigger the same impact on the target audience as the original wording did upon the source language audience. He further states that in this type of translation usually the form of the original text is changed. (Dastjerdi, March 2008, p. 9)

The argument above seems to separate “style” (the way meaning was conveyed) from “impact of wording”. At face value this distinction appears logical, emphasising form over content or vice-versa. However, in necessarily compromising some characteristics of the original, the choice of which to compromise more (form or diction) would be clear were form

separable from the charge carried by diction: is it possible in the case of poetry to separate form from impact of diction? Jakobson observes that “in poetry above all, the grammatical categories carry a high semantic import. In these conditions, the question of translation becomes much more entangled and controversial.” (Jakobson, 1959, p. 236)

Form in poetry is a powerful signifier, and should have no less impact than diction upon the source or target language audience. Furthermore, form may well have an overwhelming influence on diction. The syntagmatic choice of a particular word for its formal qualities (assonance, rhythm) is equally important as its paradigmatic choice for semantic purposes. Therein lies the genius of the poet: happening upon diction that is congruent with form as well as with content, and in a way that still makes logical sense. Even the superficial senselessness of a surrealistic poem has an underlying sense-making dynamic in creating new-sense of non-sense.

A further complication arises from Nida’s distinction between formal and dynamic translation quoted by Dastjerdi above, specifically in “triggering the same impact on the target audience”. Can we ever be certain what the impact upon the reader will be, of the original or of the translated text? While we can make informed guesses, we dare not presume either the poet’s intent or the impact on the reader. Interpretation, upon which impact hinges, is *a priori* subjective. The translator may well be able to communicate some of the impact that the source text had on him or her, but that is not to say that the source text would have had the same impact on another reader as it did on the translator when the translator translated it.

The binary distinction mentioned above (between literal and literary translation) is but one of many pervading binary opposites in the theory of translation (as applied to poetry). Most of the distinctions made appear to oppose translations on the basis of where on a spectrum of “poetic – prosaic” the translated product lies (without giving much attention to where on this spectrum the source text lies, apart from acknowledging that it qualifies as “poetry”).

Dastjerdi himself refers, usefully, to “communicative” versus “semantic” translation, and notes that “the effect of equivalence in communicative translation is illusory, because of the disjuncture in time and space between the source and target” (Dastjerdi, March 2008, p. 10).

Firstly, the distinction between communicative and semantic acknowledges a more complex relationship between source and translated text than a formal-dynamic continuum, but secondly, and more importantly, Dastjerdi raises the inevitable disjuncture, however arrived at, between source and target. We may consider this discontinuity as the core ethic upon which hinges the reprehensibility of the act of translating poetry: the integrity, the wholeness, of a poem is good, ideal, sacrosanct. Translation interrupts that integrity and is therefore bad, wicked, tainted.

Perhaps a judicial approach should consider in mitigation the extent of the loco-temporal discontinuity (that is, the disjuncture in time and space) between source text and translation, because there would possibly be more of an affront to the original text in a translation that transfers cultural references than in a translation that keeps these intact. Dastjerdi cites Newmark (1988) in describing two strategies for dealing with cultural disconnect: transference and componential analysis. Transference retains the cultural specifics, such as myth and names, while componential analysis “excludes the culture and highlights the message” (Dastjerdi, p. 28). But once again we are faced with the issue of the cultural aspects being an inherent part of the message, as much as form being an inherent part of the meaning of a poem. Explicitly transplanting the setting of a poem from early Soviet Russia into contemporary South Africa would unavoidably change its message.

Even a translation that aims for the highest degree of componential analysis has no choice but to reflect subjective choices of the translator. Dastjerdi comments that “Holmes (1970) who has a descriptive view towards translation believes that there may be as many different translations of the same poem as the number of translators” (Dastjerdi, March 2008, p. 11). This assertion seems self-evident, almost gratuitous, but it does draw our attention to the fact that the translation act is subjectively motivated and executed, and bears the unique stamp of the translator, just as no two murders are the same. Whereas homicide by nature cannot be repeated on the same individual, the same poem may be translated many, many times, and even variously by the same translator. The competent translator will be faced with countless alternatives for re-casting any element of the original in another language, none perfect, but many better in his estimation than others, or at the very least better suited to the translator’s purpose and motive. The less competent translator will have a lesser command of vocabulary

and technical tricks on which to rely, and their selection could be the product of a limited choice, but it is the product of a choice nevertheless.

The assertion that “every generation needs a new translation” (Davis, 2011) supports the view that no translation can be sufficient to the original, and that some degree of cultural and temporal trans-location is unavoidable. The act of translation fixes in time and space, but not in the same way that the original act of creating the poem does. The translation’s fixing operates at a secondary level, re-fixing what has already been fixed, and further fixing any elements that are not fixed by the original poet.

As summarised by Dante: “Nothing which is harmonized by the bond of the Muse can be changed from its own language into another, without breaking all its sweetness and harmony.” (Alighieri, n.d., p. 29). For Dante, then, sweetness and harmony would constitute the life force lost, or broken, (this quotation itself translated) by translation.

Where in untranslated poetry do Dante’s “sweetness and harmony” lie, that they should be lost in translation? Let us analyse the sources of these qualities:

1. Harmony would refer most obviously to qualities of sound. The specific vowels and consonants of every language contribute to an overall sound pattern of a poem, creating dissonances and assonances, alliteration, and lightness or darkness of mood. Even closely related languages do not replicate in parallel the auditory inflections and nuances of another, and the chances that an alliteration can be reproduced convincingly in translation are extremely slim.

As a language, Russian carries a specific auditory weight for the Anglo-Saxon ear by virtue of its differences from English: clumped consonants, closed and swallowed vowels voiced low in the throat. Even without comparing with English, there is a distinctiveness to the Russian language that does not lend itself well to cheery brightness.

John Simon recognises the impossibility of replicating this vital and essential quality

of a Russian poem in the airiness of English: “What is a translator to do, confronted with these darkly resonant sounds? Shoot the poem in the foot, or himself in the head?” (Simon, 1994, p. 2). Simon’s choice of image for his hyperbole is very fortuitous to our purpose: merely by transporting a Russian poem out of its sombre medium, violence is done, the victim incapacitated and the murder well under way.

2. In the Renaissance aesthetics of Dante the concept of harmony was related to that of the movement of the spheres, the celestial chimes created by the relative speeds of the turning of the concentric layers of the Universe, and explained as a basis for form in poetry. Even modern scientific analysis of aural aesthetics proposes fundamental relationships between auditory properties of the distances between notes and the complementary harmonics of notes in combination. The sense of “rightness” embedded in good poetic form is surely comparable to this harmony of Dante.

It is a given that form is not directly transportable between languages. As a simple example, the respective dominance of the Alexandrine and the iambic pentameter in French and English sonnets indicates a tendency of the language families to one or the other form in metered verse, or at least an established patterning of taste by repeated convention. Translating a single effective line of a sonnet from, say, French into English while retaining form poses the problem of either losing two syllables and possibly a critical caesura, or the addition of two syllables and a restrictive syllabic pattern, depending on whether the translator opts to retain the unfamiliar-sounding metre of the original, or a form that appears more natural to the target reader’s ear. Either choice will rob the poem of the semantic charge carried by its rhythm and metre, and a whole host of cultural allusions that subsist in the standardised form. That does not yet take into account the discrepancies in word-efficiency between languages: some languages are considerably more prolix than others, and it may take many more syllables and words to convey an adequate approximation of the same meaning in one language relative to another.

3. Rhyme and rhyming patterns are common to poetry in most languages. However, attempting to reproduce rhyme in translation restricts the diction available to the translator, because finding words with similar meanings that sound similar between languages is difficult.
4. Dante refers to the *bond* of the Muse: a fourth aspect of harmony would pertain to overall cohesiveness and the way in which all components of the poem (separate images, elements of form, coherence of meaning and intent, continuity, etc.) hang together to create a complete and sufficient whole. Translation necessarily entails an interruption of this bond, since the bond is created in and of language, and in and of a specific language. If the bond with the Muse (by which we may read the poem as the text of the contract between poet and Muse, as well as the bond being the glue that holds the elements of the poem together) constitutes the soul of the poem, then breaking the bond is a dire offence to both honour (dissolving a contract) and integrity (removing the links that hold the poem together).
5. The sweetness to which Dante refers is less empirically definable than harmony. Sensory agreeableness alone, which may be serviced by the aural cadences of a poem already discussed as an element of harmony, and perhaps even by the visual impact of layout, does not seem a sufficient interpretation of the image. I would suggest that Dante is making reference to uniqueness, individuality, elements of surprise, imagination, inspiration...in short, the ineffable quality of a good poem that enthralls the reader, the “Aha” factor, the “third eye”, Plato’s chora (Plato & Jowett, 2008).

The processes of sense-making that the spectator undergoes when interacting with art are by nature language-bound when that art is literary. While prose uses natural language for sense-making, poetry uses natural language much more concisely, with the semantic elements more densely packed, and hence the perceived metaphysical quality of poetry that prose lacks. Any natural language should be capable of this concentrated form of sense-making from which arises the reader’s delight, but languages seldom do this in exactly the same way.

A further contributor to the sense-making activity (and difficulty of translation) of poetry is the relative grammatical licence that a poet has: “The grammatical rules compulsory for the [sic] prose are not obligatory for the poems or we could just say that the poets do not follow them strictly wherefore the translators are usually puzzled over such very creative works. Sometimes, the poets in their imaginativeness offer really unusual, striking, new and surprising works, which are difficult for translation.” (Georgieva, n.d., p. 3)

Let us return to Roman Jakobson’s observation: “in poetry above all, the grammatical categories carry a high semantic import. In these conditions, the question of translation becomes much more entangled and controversial.” (Jakobson, 1959, p. 236). Texts that adhere to standard grammar pose enough challenges to the translator, without having to deal with these anomalies as well, and the effect created by grammatical license in one language may be completely unintelligible in another, if not irreproducible.

In *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, de Cervantes declared that “[t]ranslation from one language into another...is like looking at Flemish tapestries on the wrong side; for though the figures are visible, they are full of threads that make them indistinct, and they do not show with the smoothness and brightness of the right side” (Lednicki, 1952). Dante’s sweetness and harmony, and de Cervantes’ smoothness and brightness, are equivalent: vital characteristics of the original that are compromised by translation; perceptible, but not with the force or vigour with which they could be perceived in the original language.

2.4 THE SEVERED THREAD: FIXING IN TIME, SPACE AND INTERPRETATION

The business of the detective in fiction lies in finding clues that would be easily overlooked by the uninitiated, recognising these apparently mundane phenomena as semantically rich while disregarding red herrings, attributing the appropriate meaning by faultless deductive reasoning, and ultimately using them to solve the crime. These minutiae, as trivial as missing

footprints in the dust, a misplaced bookmark or a severed thread, are indicators of a disrupted natural course of things, a fixing of the act of the crime unambiguously in time and space: things that would otherwise have been different had the victim lived and had the perpetrator not committed the crime. The footprints would have been visible, the bookmark in its correct place, and the thread unbroken.

A poem in its original language is replete with ambiguities. The poet uses language to create layers and pluralities of possible meaning and intent that give depth to a poem, and therefore life. These ambiguities arise from the language itself: puns, quibbles, play with grammar... none of which are readily translatable. Even ellipsis, a frequent source of ambiguity, may appear perfectly natural in one language (such as the ellipsis of a personal pronoun or article), but could seem alien and contrived in another. Lednicki observes that a “piece of art representing an intuitive perception is impossible to translate. It will have either a new expression or a new content.” (Lednicki, 1952, p. 304).

Cervantes’ image of the tapestry is a pertinent one: many threads woven together to create a picture that would not exist if the threads were not layered and intertwined in a very specific way. Breaking one thread of the tapestry would cause the picture to unravel and dissolve.

Faced with ambiguity, the translator of a poem rarely has any choice but to settle on one single meaning or interpretation of intent, and translate that, losing in the process the myriad possible alternative interpretations that the poet may consciously or unconsciously have included in the original poem. However conscious the translator is of inherent ambiguity, and however hard they may try to communicate these ambiguities in another language, precision in this matter can be no more than relative. The reader of the translated text is not free to allow the associations and harmonies of the original to generate the successive spheres of reference that constitute the universe created by the source text.

Furthermore, translating may bring ambiguities to the text, in that the translated text will most likely contain layers of meaning that the poet did not intend. Such fortuitous hazards may serve to give depth to the translation (as is the case for Ezra Pound), but they override the purity and substance of the original.

Untranslated, a poem is not fixed in its possible interpretations, but neither is it fixed in time and place. It is a continuous thread that can transcend the culture and time in which it was created by allowing new associations and cultural relevancies to arise in perpetuity. In reading an ancient poem such as *Beowulf*, we bring the cultural references of our own time to bear on our interpretation. Not only have the semantic associations of particular words changed and gained layers of meaning since they were written in Old English, which colours our reading of them, but we relate to situations and forms in a way that the original author could never have imagined. The Old English universe was perceived differently to ours: the laws of physics and cause-and-effect, the size and shape of the Earth and how it behaved in the solar system, the normative glue that held society together, were all alien to us, but in reading the original text of *Beowulf* we are linked by a continuous thread to that universe, and able to make sense of that world in its differences and parallels to ours. And thus it will be for readers of the saga many centuries hence: the thread of the poem will continue to give it life, even as its colour fades and its meanings become increasingly frayed by the passage of culture and time.

The translator of *Beowulf*, however, embeds in his or her translation cultural and linguistic specifics that sever that continuous thread: language, themes and images that are directly accessible to our generation. The translator transports the saga from the culture in which it was created, and fixes it in a new cultural universe that will be coherent and easily intelligible to a contemporary reader of the target language. The text is rendered discontinuous, and “the message is deprived of its initial content” (Jakobson, 1959, p. 236).

In detective fiction the identity of the murderer remains uncertain until the crime is solved; therein lies the tension that gives texture and pace to the story. Until he or she is exposed, the murderer poses as an upholder of life, a fellow maintainer of the sweetness and harmony of continued existence. The translator of poetry likewise adopts an attitude of righteousness and conviction in the order of things, the last person whom one would suspect of wishing the departed ill or of doing violence to the sanctity and integrity of the tapestry of life. With the best of intentions, translators masquerade as advocates of the original poem, hiding their guilt behind protestations that they are giving the poem a wider readership, or paying homage to its genius.

If the poem is the text of the contract (the bond) between poet and muse, then the translated poem may indeed be seen as an elegy for the poem: a celebration of the dead. After all, as Rigsbee observes, “[t]o elegize is to sing about the ends of things, apocalyptic matters both global and local, even as it is about memory and legacy” (Harrington, 2006, p. 48).

The translator, having severed the thread of the poem and rendered it discontinuous, pays tribute to its memory and legacy. There is redemption in that, for “at the same time [...] to elegize also suggests something about how poets, as language users, devise beginnings – often ironic – in the face of discontinuity”. (Harrington, 2006, p. 48)

A successful translation, then, severs the thread, leaving the traces of the murderous deed, but in doing so splits and splices the severed thread: “a whole translation will be faithful to the matter, and it will ‘approximate the form’ of the original; and it will have a life of its own, which is the voice of the translator.” (Leighton, 1990, p. 447)

3 THE CORONER'S REPORT

3.1 THE TEXT: ПОСЛЕДНИЙ ТОСТ

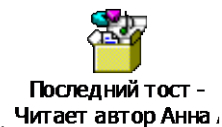
The original text of the poem in Russian is provided below, with a transliteration of the Cyrillic characters for reference:

	Transliteration
ПОСЛЕДНИЙ ТОСТ	<i>Poslédniy tost</i>
Я пью за разоренный дом,	<i>Ya p'yú za razoryónniy dom,</i>
За злую жизнь мою,	<i>Za zlúyu zhizn' moyú</i>
За одиночество вдвоем,	<i>Za odinnóchestvo vdvoyóm,</i>
И за тебя я пью,—	<i>I za tebyá ya p'yu –</i>
За ложь меня предавших губ,	<i>Za lózh menya predávshikh губ,</i>
За мертвый холод глаз,	<i>Za myórtviy khólod glás,</i>
За то, что мир жесток и груб,	<i>Za tó, shto mir zhestók i grub,</i>
За то, что Бог не спас.	<i>Za tó, shto Bókh nye spas.</i>

(June 27, 1934) (Akhmatova, 1934,1983)

A sound clip of Anna Akhmatova herself reading the poem is available at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yyH7nI4KR4>: and embedded here:



3.1.1 POST MORTEM: THE CRIME SCENE

Crime leaves stains. It irrevocably changes the physical space in which it took place; it leaves the marks of a struggle, and imprints the natural order of things with the traces of its evil. Contextual details of how the world was before the crime help us to reconstruct the events that led up to the shape of the world after the crime.

The crime scene that concerns us is the space that Plato refers to as the *chora*, the site of the ineffable in poetry, the space in which Anna Akhmatova originally wrote *Posledniy tost*. In examining this space, the poem's context, as it was before the crime of translation took place, we are able to compare it with the world as it is now – post-translation of the poem, and reconstruct the procedures that meddled with the natural order.

As already mentioned, *Posledniy tost* was written during a dry spell in Akhmatova's writing career, an island of low production in an otherwise prolific career: Akhmatova did not publish any books between 1922, the peak of her fame, and 1940. Causes of the dearth are not immediately apparent: no longer under the discouraging influence of her second husband, Vladimir Shileiko, she was free to write as, when and how she wished. Although there was a ban on publication of her poetry, subsequently lifted, bans on publishing had not at other times prevented her from writing and employing samizdat¹⁸ to distribute her poetry and commit it to posterity.

Fellow poet and friend Alexandr Blok had died in 1921 and her first husband, Gumilev (divorced in 1913), was executed in the same year, which was also the year of her breakup

¹⁸ A system in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and countries within its orbit by which government-suppressed literature was clandestinely printed and distributed. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

with Shileiko. The poet Osip Mandelshtam died in the gulag in 1938, having been arrested in 1934 when Akhmatova was residing with the Mandelstams. Her friends were all emigrating, or had already emigrated, fleeing Stalin's Great Terror.¹⁹

Whatever the reason for the reduced production, there was no lack of inspiration in the events of her life for the deeply sarcastic, lonesome, defiant and self-pitying 'Last Toast'. Apart from depressing and reduced circumstances, poor health (tuberculosis and heart problems) may have convinced her that she herself was due to breathe her last, and that this toast would not only be the last toast that she would offer up – a farewell to the Silver Age – but also the last that she would physically be capable of. Equally, it may be an ironic vindication of her determination to remain in Russia, a decision that was to contribute not insignificantly to her notoriety.

Categorising Akhmatova's writing in more transparent terms than "Silver Age" or "Acmeist" is challenging, while bearing in mind that chronologically her oeuvre spans schools of poetry as diverse as Russian Symbolism (while Akhmatova, along with the other Acmeists, scorned the "Symbolist cult") (Akhmatova & Thomas, 1988), Futurism, ego-Futurism, Imagism, Modernism, and even Beat poetry. Josef Brodsky asserts that she "never resembled anyone" (Akhmatova & Coffin, 1983). Acmeism itself is a niche movement, typically seen as being exemplified by only three major poets: Gumilev, Mandelstam and Akhmatova herself, however "central to Russian poetry of [the Twentieth] century" (Doherty, 1995).

There is little evidence in her writing of direct confrontation with Soviet totalitarianism as a political statement (although admittedly to do so would be suicide, as the execution of her first husband, Gumilev, proved). Her political stand is clear, but only in as much as she frames it in a personal and emotional context that criticises obliquely, rather than being politically *engagé*.

¹⁹ Biographical details sourced from Simon, 1994

Kirsten Painter describes Akhmatova as a “Tempered Modernist”: her work is clearly distinct from symbolism, but lacks “the rupture and discord of radical modernism...Tempered Modernists charted their own different path, offering a sharpened depiction of ordinary reality, and subduing (rather than annihilating) the expression of the self so as to keep it in balance with its external surroundings.” (Painter, 2009, p. 52). ‘The Last Toast’ is neither decidedly Symbolist nor Modernist: its themes are mundane but passionately so, its form conservative but not archaic.

In describing Akhmatova’s poem ‘Do You Want to Know How it Was?’, Painter asserts that although “the declaration of love is overt, the inner lives of the figures in the poem are opaque and beyond our grasp.” (Painter, 2009, p. 58). We are dealing with a very similar opacity in the ‘Last Toast’. Although the poem is easily accessible and very personal, the personal details that may shed light on the narrator’s reasoning and motives are intangible. Gumilev’s Acmeist review of Akhmatova’s poetry included the assertion that “she hardly ever explains things, rather, she shows them” (Doherty, 1995, p. 125). The lack of explanation of the narrator’s actions in ‘The Last Toast’ is central to the highly compelling nature of the poem.

Blok scholar Dimitrii Maksimov notes (as quoted by Rylkova, p.336) that “it was in [Akhmatova’s] poetry that she was able to soar over [sic] the mundane and to express what was really important”. Perhaps it is this soaring that is neither the soaring metaphysics of Symbolism nor the soaring linguistic tricks of Futurism that is most appropriately described as Acmeism – a reduction of the signifier to its brute honesty, but in a supremely lyrical way that accedes essence.

Key to Painter’s categorisation of Tempered Modernism is a sense of gesturality, perhaps more pertinent to ‘The Last Toast’ – which is effectively no more than the repeated gesture of raising a glass and drinking – than to any of Akhmatova’s other poems. The physical gesture

in Painter's view establishes a "silent dialogue" that owes much to Lev Tolstoy's prose²⁰, but that

also dominates Achmatova's and Eliot's: a conversation transmitted through body parts, gestures, or tense silences. Like Tolstoj, Achmatova often foregrounds the image of hands to evoke tension between characters. However, she does this in minimalist form, omitting the context provided by a novel. Hands, fingers, and braids replace the absent narrative and give voice to the speaker's emotional experience. (Painter, 2009, p. 54)

Doherty notes the "tendency of Acmeist texts to create a verbal gesture (at a higher level than the individual lexical unit) imitative of some actual experience or sensation [using verbal signs to] connect with some concrete referent" (Doherty, 1995, p. 101). 'The Last Toast' is this verbal and physical gesture brought together in superb mimesis, for the poem itself constitutes the gesture, the raising of the toast, as much as the repeated physical gestures that it describes.

Rather than 'The Last Toast' constituting a silent dialogue and evoking tension between characters, it is more accurately a silent monologue that evokes tension within the narrator, or between the narrator and inanimate circumstances, her own body parts, or her mental states. The poem is addressed to nobody in particular, and is most appropriately seen as a deeply candid internal monologue that would be embarrassing and voyeuristic for an observer to witness. The reader's gaze and presence are not included in the inclusive gestures of the

²⁰ "Akmatova brought into the Russian lyric all the enormous complexity and wealth of the Russian novel . . . Akmatova's origins lie completely within Russian prose, not poetry. She developed her poetic form, keen and original, with a backward glance at psychological prose." Mandelstam, by Clarence Brown (Cambridge University Press. 1978), page 97, cited in Simon, 1994, p. 9

narrator, which are compounded into a gesture of self-inflicted inebriation. One imagines the narrator (convincingly in this case Akhmatova herself) standing in an underheated, underfurnished garret, empty of her friends, son, ex-husbands, lovers and fellow poets, repeatedly filling and draining a grimy glass of cheap vodka. Even potential gestures by others (God performing the gesture of redemption, for example) are negated and reduced to relative constructions.

On a less than complimentary note toward the character of Akhmatova, we have the failed biographer and contemporary of the poet, Sophia Ostrovskaia, stating in her journal that Akhmatova was “saucy, egotistical, plays at being the good queen, is profligate, has ceased to live her own life, for she lives only biographically *with an eye on the gesture* and the ‘word for the future’” (Rylkova, 2010, p. 341) (my emphasis). The statement about Akhmatova’s real-life gestures coincides neatly with the gestural dynamics highlighted by Painter. Theatricality appears to have been a constant in Akhmatova’s personality and her poetry. A famous quote attributed to Aleksandr Blok in respect of Marina Tsvetaeva has it that Akhmatova wrote as if a man were watching her, but that Tsvetaeva should or did write as if God were watching her²¹. If Blok’s assertion holds true for ‘The Last Toast’, then the watching man is not complicit in the gestures of the narrator, who is asserting the right of the exhibitionist not to be watched, but at the same time compels observation.

What further reflections on the personal and historical context of *Posledniy tost* would be relevant to our case, other than the general observations of Nadezhda Mandelstam and Josef Brodsky, respectively: “Akhmatova was a poet not of love but of the repudiation of love for the sake of humanity”, and “she was, essentially, a poet of human ties: cherished, strained, severed. She showed these evolutions first through the prism of the individual heart, then through the prism of history, such as it was.” (Simon, 1994, pp. 14, 15)?

²¹ Definitive source untraceable. 1932?

3.1.2 POST MORTEM: THE CORPSE ON THE SLAB

A morgue is a cold place. The body we are examining is cold. The frigidity in which we find ourselves is not the unheated Russian winter of 1934 braved by Anna Akhmatova, or the dead-chill gaze of line 6 of the poem, but the cold created by the distance of history. This is a cold that preserves and that prevents decay, that slows down (but does not altogether stop) the inevitable processes that return all organic matter to a base state. The time has come for us to dissect the corpse, to incise and examine, to dissect into component parts and to determine causes, to hunt for clues and above all, to learn.

What are we to learn from this post-mortem? Not so much the cause of death, for we know of multiple translations that exist of this poem, but to determine the methods and means by which the corpse was rendered a corpse. As we proceed systematically through the autopsy, we gain a clear understanding of the anatomy of the deceased, and may thus judge exactly how the murder was perpetrated and to what extent life can be lost in translation. We are told²² that Akhmatova herself held that “it is impossible to understand major literary events without knowledge of all the circumstances of their conception”. While Akhmatova is referring to the emergence of Acmeism here, we can surely conceive of both the original poem and the violence of its translation as “major literary events”.

In overall form the poem is simple: two stanzas²³ of identical construction, four lines each, with rhyme scheme abab, cdcd. The metre is resolutely iambic, alternating four and three feet

²² Doherty, p.61, quotes L. A. Madrykina: ‘An Unwritten Book, “Pages from a Diary” by A. A. Akhmatova’, in *Books. Archives. Autographs*. (Moscow, 1973)

²³ The typesetting of editions varies; some include a stanza break between the fourth and fifth lines, while others do not. This accounts for the discrepancy in layout between the translations: a fact about which I only became aware late in this study. The difficulty of locating a definitive edition is compounded by the fact that the original may well have been handwritten by more than one person, or even conveyed by word of mouth and only

per line. There are no enjambments; each line is a full sentence or phrase, each ending on a comma, with the exception of a dash separating the first and second stanzas, and a full stop at the end.

The form is in no way innovative or groundbreaking, and its simplicity evokes clarity and dispassionate statement. The rhythm has a definite momentum, but is neither rushed nor lilting. The impetus does not allow the reader to dwell unduly on any line, but guides gently to the next, as the narrator moves on to the following object of her libations.

The rhymes are simple and generally rich, with scarcely noticeable contrast between rhyming vowels or consonants: the hard-soft contrast between the “o”-sound in lines 1 and 3, and the fricative sound difference between lines 6 and 8 is rendered almost indistinct when the lines are spoken out loud.

Tonally, there is extensive repetition of the “z”-sound, especially at the beginnings of lines, which reinforces the outward movement of the preposition “za”. This is augmented by scattered affricates like “zh”, “sh”, and “kh”, and seasoned by equally distributed voiced plosives and nasals. The twisting vowel-consonant combinations, turning alternately inward and outward, are not lyrical or sing-song, but evocative of a to-and-fro motion reminiscent of repeatedly raising a glass.

A noticeable consonant stress – a double-n or a soft n – gives a musing cadence to the first three lines, whereas the remaining lines tend to be staccato and clipped, as if the narrator is starting out pensively, but gathers pace as the bitterness of the tone increases. The contrast in pace between the first three lines and the fourth is particularly significant, as the “thou” to which the toast is addressed in the fourth line takes on the quality of an afterthought.

transcribed later. I proceeded with the study and analysis as if the stanza break were definitive, even though the single authoritative published version that I was able to track down (in scanned version only) does not include it.

The poet makes extensive use of enumeration, each line being effectively a different recipient of the toast. According to D.M. Thomas, Akhmatova once referred to “the blessedness of repetition” (Akhmatova & Thomas, 1988, p. i)²⁴, and she makes comprehensive use of repetition in this poem. The enumerated elements are all introduced by the preposition *za* (to), most of them eliding the verb *pit’* (to drink), and the first-person subject of the verb, except in the first and fourth lines, the first naming of the subject and verb serving to introduce the narrator and the action, and the second largely as expedient to form, providing the requisite rhyme and metre that maintain the established prosody, and making the line itself stand out from the others, again highlighting the sense that the recipient of the toast is no more than a postscript.

In keeping with the Acmeist ideal of verbal economy, a definite terseness is maintained throughout; not only by the omission of the narrator’s explicit presence, but also in what is, crucially, not said: how was the home ravaged, whose solitude, who is the “thou” to whom she drinks, whose cold and dead gaze? Above all, no evidence or reason is provided for the deficiency of God’s redemption, beyond the foregoing content of the poem, but one feels that there is more to the conviction of divine indifference than what has been listed already.

This final construction bears some analysis. The assertion that God does not save is not a Nietzschean or Soviet “God is dead”, but rather an affirmation of the existence of a godhead, but one that is insensible to earthly suffering, or ignorant of the salvation promised. The implication for the narrator and for the reader is that the Primary Mover is not only disinterested, but also somehow ungracious, the root of the Russian expression of thanks, *spasibo*, having direct reference to the verb denoting salvation/redemption. To break momentarily into the speculative part of our argument at this point: translation cannot do justice to this allusive serendipity of the Russian language. The English modalities of

²⁴ Original source untraceable.

gratitude do not encompass a redemptive or salutary construction. “God saving your grace” or “Lord love you”, apart from being tritely archaic, are expressions of self-deprecation or contrived mutual embarrassment, rather than of either indebtedness or divine pardon. To fill all associations of the simple phrase of the last line of this poem in English would require a disruptive circumlocution, and to express all of that in a single line of iambic trimeter would be impossible.

This is not the only place in which Akhmatova makes incomparably efficient use of the Russian language: the solitude-couple oxymoron in line 3 is superbly concise, and plays on the numerical associations of the words for “solitary” and “couple” while leveraging inflection and compound forms to create a shocking discontinuity out of an otherwise mundane phrase. Once again, the translator is faced with an economy of language whose impact cannot be replicated readily or effectively: “one-engendering two-ness” simply does not have the fluency, or the precise sense of mutual alienation within a couple that the original has.

Fellow Acmeists lauded Akhmatova’s conciseness, and the methods by which she achieved it.:

Thus, from the point of view not of grammatical but of artistic and stylistic function, Akhmatova’s use of the predicative instrumental can be placed in the same category as her use of similes and adverbs: all these features bear equal witness to her tendency towards syntactical contraction and an increase in expressive energy.²⁵

The problem for the translator into English is that the predicative instrumental is a clumsy construction, burdened with a weight of prepositions and weak verbal gymnastics, rather than with the taciturn humming thud of its Russian equivalent.

²⁵ Eykenbaum, B. ‘Anna Akhmatova. Opyt analiza’ (Petrograd) 1923. p. 399, *in* (Doherty, 1995, p. 163)

Syntax and grammar: Akhmatova was notorious for playing fast and loose with conventions of Russian typography and grammar, favouring sonority or effect over stringent syntax and spelling. That said, Brodsky (a poet in both Russian and English) maintains that “[h]er syntax is simple and free of subordinate clauses whose gnomic convolutions are responsible for most Russian literature; in fact, in its simplicity, her syntax resembles English” (Akhmatova & Coffin, 1983). Simple her constructions may be, but in *Posledniy tost* expressions like “*za lozh’ menya predavshikh gub*” (“to the lie that is mine of betraying lips”, in dog-trot) would not pass in ordinary Russian conversation in any register. The difficulty that all translators have with this line, and the quote from Eykenbaum above, would seem to indicate that Brodsky’s assertion does not always hold true.

Likewise, the form of the word “*kholod*” (cold) is grammatically inaccurate, omitting the inflection and gender of the adjective and retaining only its root. Such a conceit of poetic license would not be out of place in the poetry of an earlier generation, such as Pushkin, but verges on the archaic in 1934; possibly an equivalent of “mine eyes” in English poetry. Nevertheless, Akhmatova gets away with it, and with other contingencies of a similar vein for the sake of rhythm. Is this of any specific relevance to a translator of the poem? Not so much at the level of the individual word or phrase, but the translator would need to employ strategies to bring across the clipped terseness that such constructions evoke, and perhaps even subtly include a few elements of poetic license that create a similar effect.

Imagery and Symbol: Acmeists rejected the Symbolist “dominance of the ‘symbol’ as the prime structural feature of poetry. What is always implicit in the Symbolist definition of the symbol is the subordination of the primary (denotative) meaning to a secondary (symbolic, connotative) meaning.” (Doherty, 1995). That is not to say that there is a complete absence of symbolic representation in ‘The Last Toast’ – on the contrary, the raising of a toast is a symbolic gesture, and the ravaged house (or, as I prefer, home) can be construed as a symbol for many events and circumstances of Akhmatova’s life: personal, economic, social and political. However, ‘The Last Toast’ still gives primacy to phenomenology, to denotative meaning.

The poem is not rich in imagery that evokes comparisons and contrasts that lyricise the outside world or give substance through the creative tension of metaphor. The relative absence of metaphor and simile is characteristic of Akhmatova (Woodward, 1993, p. 246).

Woodward claims that the parallelism that other poets create by means of metaphor is supplanted in Akhmatova by common referents in the form of syntactic constructions (in this case the action of drinking) that are repeatedly applied to seemingly disparate phenomena or situations. The translator, thankfully liberated from the onerous and inherently “soul-destroying” task of translating typical metaphor, has to nonetheless be aware that there is parallelising action throughout the poem, and that each enumerated element, while following a natural and coherent progression, needs to retain its own identity as referent in what can be construed as an extended metaphor.

‘The Last Toast’ does not operate through the senses: there is hardly any tactile, auditory, smell or visual input at all. The cold gaze of line 6 is figuratively, rather than physically, cold, and the gustatory sense is scarcely hinted at; we have no indication of what the narrator is drinking, what its temperature is, or what it may taste like; there is no feel of the hardness of the glass against teeth or lips.

The single theological reference in the poem in conjunction with the action of drinking may evoke the Eucharist, but only in the vaguest of casual associations, for which there is little evidence of any intent on the part of the poet to evoke. Transubstantiation could conceivably operate on the level of the poet and the printed text of the poem, but this seems rather far-fetched in the context of this specific poem, and of little relevance to a translator.

In the event of a murder the corpse does take up physical space, and it has mass. It is unique from all other corpses. It is a self-contained entity, founded as an I, an individual in physical reality. We must bear in mind the individuality, the weight and the physical presence of the lyric I. This is not the same self-important, physically domineering I of the Ego-Futurist movement against which the lyric I of Acmeism opposed itself. It is perhaps even a subtle critique of the grand self-reflexive gesture of the Ego-Futurist: “Acmeist poetry ironises the lyric persona, or seeks to be self-critical, rather than taking the self-aggrandising attitude of

the Ego-Futurists” (Doherty, 1995, p. 173). The translator’s keen awareness of this fact will be rewarded by not overstating the narrator’s presence to the extent that it becomes arrogant.

To finalise the autopsy, let us return to Gumilev’s²⁶ parallel anatomy as a checklist:

- **Flesh: Stylistics:** forms of words, word combinations, syntax and tropes. The flesh of the corpse is spare and lithe, without much extraneous fat, and retains an impressive muscle tone that renders it sinewy and compact;
- **Skeleton: Composition:** general impression, localised meanings, intensity and movement of the poet’s thoughts, feelings and images; strophic form. Skeletally, the frame is small, and like the flesh, dense, compact and solid. All joints are well articulated and supple;
- **Nervous system: Eidology:** repertoire of themes, and the poet’s approach to these, the feeling that impelled the poet toward the creative act. Both physiologically and psychologically, the nervous system is, in keeping with the other physical aspects, contained and trim. A possible tendency to self-indulgence, and perhaps depression, is tempered by an ironic reflexivity. All signs indicate a natural and intensive responsiveness to stimuli, with mental processing of a high order, but still firmly grounded in linear phenomena without undue recourse to abstraction. A slight compromise of sensory faculties is evidenced, but this is unlikely to have hampered the effective functioning of the individual;
- **Circulatory system: Phonetics:** the aural aspect: rhythm, sound organisation and rhyme. Highly efficient valves, sinuses and a strong diastole-systole pulse indicate a particularly vigorous individual not prone to syncope or fibrillation.

²⁶ As quoted in Doherty, with Doherty’s summaries from Gumilev’s essays.

3.2 ANALYSING THE EVIDENCE

Having analysed the corpse, we now progress to reconstructing the crime, analysing how it was done, and holding the perpetrators to account. To facilitate comparison, each translation that we are discussing is presented here side-by side (Table 1), with scansion marks for later comparison and reference:

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EXHIBIT 1	EXHIBIT 2	EXHIBIT 3	EXHIBIT 4
<p>THE FINAL TOAST</p> <p>~ / ~ ~ / (~) ~ / (~) ~ / I drink to the house past all repair, To the evil of my lifetime, to The isolation that we share, ~ / ~ / ~ / I also drink to you;</p> <p>To lips betraying me with lies, To the world, severe and grave, To the deadly coldness of the eyes, To God, who did not save.</p>	<p>THE LAST TOAST</p> <p>~ / ~ ~ / (/l) ~ / ~ ~ / I drink to the house, already destroyed, And my whole life, too awful to tell, To the loneliness we together enjoyed, ~ / ~ / ~ / I drink to you as well,</p> <p>To the eyes with deathly cold imbued, To the lips that betrayed me with a lie, To the world for being cruel and rude, To God who didn't save us, or try.</p>	<p>The Last Toast</p> <p>~ / ~ / ~ / I drink to the ruined house, To the evil of my life, To our shared loneliness / ~ / ~ / And I drink to you –</p> <p>To the lie of lips that betrayed me, To the deadly coldness of the eyes, To the fact that the world is cruel and depraved, To the fact that God did not save.</p>	<p><i>The Last Toast</i></p> <p>~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / I drink to our demolished house, To all this wickedness, To you, our loneliness together, ~ / ~ / I raise my glass –</p> <p>And to the dead-cold eyes, The lie that has betrayed us, The coarse, brutal world, the fact That God has not saved us.</p>
Reeser	Coffin	Hemschmeyer	Thomas

Table 1: Four translations of *Posledniy tost*

3.2.1 JUST NOT GOOD FORM

We have already noted that homicide, however justified, is morally reprehensible; it upsets the equilibrium of society and the natural order of things. The killer's deed immediately puts him or her in a class of those who upset the tidiness of our perception of the world as we have constructed it. In short, it is a disruption of form. One imagines an upper middle-class character in an Agatha Christie novel loading red herrings at the discovery of a corpse in a manicured and beautifully ordered manor house: "I do so wish this hadn't happened here. What will the people in the village say? Frankly, it's just not good form."

Our original text presents us with a form (a structure, an organisation, a sense of integrity of the constituent parts) that is complete, ordered, and that binds the meaning of the text to its physical reality. Translation cannot help but mess with this principled order, since that order is constructed in and of the native language of the text.

Here we will examine each of the Exhibits for their respective disruption of the clear and natural order.

3.2.1.1 *Layout and strophic form*

Two of our Exhibits retain the exact strophic form of the original, that is to say two stanzas of four lines each [see Footnote 23]. Despite Gumilev's criticism of Akhmatova's early work that her style was better suited to the tercet than to the quatrain (Doherty, 1995), she persisted in favouring the quatrain as a strophic element in a large number of her poems throughout her life (and seldom using the tercet). 'The Last Toast' does not adhere to the formal rules of the octave, and neither does the development or form of each stanza constitute a quatrain in the strictest sense. That does not fully explain either Exhibit 2 or Exhibit 3 omitting the stanza break after line 4. Both perpetrators of these Exhibits tend to retain the original quatrain breaks throughout the remainder of their translations of Akhmatova's works, so their justification should be reasonable.

We are not aware of any printings of the original poem in Russian that lay it out without the stanza break, although it is possible that these do exist. Economic constraints on printing at

the time the poem was first published may have forced printers to remove as much white space as possible to save paper. Similarly, if the poem had originally been transmitted by the poet in samizdat, there may have been alternative versions, or a transcriber may have found it pertinent to include or exclude a stanza break that the poet did not intend. Akhmatova did not always have the luxury of editing proofs before they went to press, either.

Given all that, it is nevertheless unlikely that translators would not use the current definitive version available, which does contain the stanza break.

I submit that the choice to omit the stanza break by two of the translators is an effort to render a sense of the compactness of the original, or that they felt that the development of the themes merited a closer linking of the eyes and lips of lines 5 and 6 to the “you” of line 4, implying that the person with whom solitude is shared, the recipient of the toast and the perpetrator of coldness and lies is all the same person. But let us consider in our judgement that the poet makes no such definitive link, and is almost adamant about the separation of each recipient of the toast, using no enjambments to link the self-contained themes of each line.

We have noted Akhmatova’s use of a single base referent as a metaphorical conceit, of which the translators of Exhibits 2 and 3 may well be aware, and they are perhaps seeking to compensate for the lack of standard metaphor by reinforcing the continuity of the drinking as a base referent. This scarcely excuses the obliteration of a stanza break.

In joining the first and second stanzas, two of the translators have not only robbed the poem of its organisational integrity, but have also killed off at least two characters, possibly three. If their motive was to create an impression of compactness, this is hardly justified; the impression of abrupt terseness is just as well portrayed in two stanzas, and perhaps even better, as in one.

3.2.1.2 Visual impact

The alternating long-short-long-short visual appearance of the original poem is remarkable. It sets up a sense of binary oppositions for the reader, before any contact is made with the semantic content of the words. This rhythm established at the macro-level is reinforced by the

me-you-me-you dynamics and themes of the poem. Exhibit 4 strives nobly to retain this peculiarity, falling short only in line 5. The others, constrained by rhythm, diction and the exigencies of retaining meaning in each line, compromise a vital, and vitalising, component of the poem's form.

3.2.1.3 Metre and rhythm

Despite the original having the relative advantage for the translator into English of being iambic, only Exhibit 4 succeeds in rendering a convincing iambic tetrameter in the first line. An almost heroic attempt at retaining the ballad form is made in Exhibit 4, certainly in the first stanza, although with only a dimeter in line 4, rather than a trimeter. The trimeter of Exhibit 4's fifth line does at least keep an iambic rhythm while dropping a foot, and line 6 loses a syllable. Other sundry disruptions to the ballad form, and some forced scansion in places lose much of the ground gained, however.

Both Exhibit 1 and Exhibit 2 start off with an anapaestic metre (taking into account upbeats, silent unstressed syllables and quasi-caesuras), which is sustained with mixed success, and jumbled together with iambs (very accurately rendered in line 4 in both cases). While the anapaests do give some comfortable sense of regularity, the metre itself lacks the to-and-fro binary movement so critical to the original's theme.

Exhibit 3's line 4 trochee is disturbing and out of character, negating any argument for maintaining continuity by omitting the stanza break.

All of the Exhibits start out reasonably well with metre, but none manage the stable consistency of *Posledniy tost*.

3.2.1.4 Prosody

The Russian poet (and American Poet Laureate) Joseph Brodsky reacted violently to translations into English free verse of some poems of (the Acmeist) Osip Mandelstam. His contention was that the translators had done the prosody of Mandelstam a grave disservice. "Meters in verse are kinds of spiritual magnitudes for which nothing can be substituted..."

They cannot be replaced by each other and *especially not by free verse*... Something really should be done. Russian poetry does not deserve being treated like a poor relation.”

(Bonnefoy, 1979, p. 374). It should be noted that Brodsky was not a fan of free verse (Bonnefoy, 1979, p. 374).

Bonnefoy redeems or excuses the translators into free verse to some degree, stating: “*no part of a poem, not even its form*, has a detached or constant meaning; it is only an element which receives its value from a totality in which certainly are active all the other functional aspects of writing” (Bonnefoy, 1979, p. 375). He even convincingly makes the case for the semiotic fluidity of form, leading to “diverse, if not contradictory” meanings over time. Bonnefoy sees classical form as having emerged from what he terms an “orthodoxy”, a metaphor of the social law and reflecting the perceived order of the universe.

According to Bonnefoy, “free verse, reciprocally, can appear only when no common truth rules any longer the spirits of men – that is, when everybody is fumbling about for his own personal system of values, for his form”. In short, the orthodoxies of the past are no longer relevant or particularly meaningful in the contemporary poet’s lexicon post-Nietzsche, post-Freud, post-revolution.

This is not to say that formal verse, for Bonnefoy, does not have its rightful place in the more modern text, but it does so in a way that it becomes “the difficulty which helps the poet to go beyond himself, to be born in a higher world” (Bonnefoy, 1979, p. 376), and he concludes that the modern translation of even the most classical formal verse can only be in free verse.

Here we have divergent and contradictory views about the translation of verse into free verse or structured verse. We may choose to emphasise the cultural weight of structured verse both in the original and in the later text, or we can regard the conventional verse-patterns of a given language as the key factor of prudence. That the ballad form is a stable, albeit somewhat dated, structure in both English and Russian does not mean that the ballad carries an identical emotional or cultural charge in both, or that the modern reader will react in the same way to a ballad as the reader in 1934 would.

We can nevertheless be assured that the selection of form was a deliberate, if not wholly premeditated, choice on the part of the poet, and that it is imbued with meaning, part of the semiotic content of the text. It would be ignoble to accuse Akhmatova of being a mere versifier or poetaster.

Without providing a solution to the problem, but effectively linking prosody to the life-force of the poem, Meschonnic muses:

[a] paroxysm occurs above all when a poetry in one language proceeds according to another idea of poetry, another relation to its past, another tie between rhyme and convention. Between rhyme and life. Translating then finds itself in an apparently insoluble contradiction... Translation is constrained to show this difference or to occult it. It is unstable in both cases... Modern Russian poetry continues to rhyme the rhyme-convention. It is written more or less metrically. To translate it according to the character of modern French poetry is to transpose the continuous into the discontinuous. To preserve its rhymes, to metrically count its syllables - this is to take versification for poetry, a past for a present. To make imitations, the neo-. But to write it as free verse is to break its organizational principle, its language, its tie to its own [...] century. (Meschonnic & Bedetti, 1988, p. 98)

None of our Exhibits render *Posledniy tost* into free verse, and so on the face of it retain some of Akhmatova's "organisational principle". As we have already seen, this is merely a superficial nod, as none of them are able to pursue either a direct (iambic) or transposed (anapaestic) regular prosody to the end.

Aside from the problematic of rhythm and metre, we also need to consider rhyme, which, according to Meschonnic "is not only an echo from word to word, but in addition the echo of the echo that is its model" (p. 93). Some license with exact rhyme scheme can be given to the translator, and to expect identical rhyme sounds between original and translation is simply unfair. It would be judicious to assume that the crafter of the original has used rhyme as a formal construct that supplements meaning at a global level, rather than investing massive meaning in individual rhymes. In this light it would be sufficient for the translator of verse to

give an overall impression of the type of rhyme and rhyme scheme of the original, if translating into structured verse.

Even so, have our perpetrators given the requisite attention to rhyme to convey the overall sense of binary movement, self-integrity and dark colour that the rhymes of *Posledniy tost* evoke?

Exhibit 1 manages an abab, cdcd scheme, swapping the content of lines 6 and 7 for the benefit of rhyming “eyes” and “lies”, “grave” and “save” in scheme, and thus perturbing the thematic progression at a crucial point where the narrowed thematic perspective broadens. Giving precedence to rhyme over thematic progression in this way fails the reader and the original. A similar failing is evident in line 2, where the enjambment in the translation that rhymes a weak preposition conflicts disastrously with the original text, not only by using a weak word, but also by introducing a run-on where the original is resolutely one-phrase-per-line. The sounds themselves, apart from the dark “-ave” (with the serendipitous sombre association created by the quibble on the word “grave”) are airy and light, lacking the cadaverous booming of “-om”, and the brusquely clipped “-ub” and “-as”.

Exhibit 2 takes similar liberties with thematic progression, reversing the content of lines 5 and 6 for the sake of rhyme. The effect is less cataclysmic, as the opposition between body parts and the metaphysical themes is not disrupted. The chief weakness of this translation’s rhyme is the *recherché* syntax that it creates in line 5 (analogous to the predicative instrumental inflection lamented in Section 3.1.2). It also introduces diction (“imbued”) that is not suggested in the original, and does the same in line 3 with the word “enjoyed”, which is far from the meaning implied by Akhmatova. As the sounds of the rhymes are more true to aural effects than Exhibit 1, we can plead for the translator of Exhibit 2 on the matter of rhyme.

Exhibit 3 does not attempt rhyme, except to create a couplet of the last two lines, a conceit that is more appropriate for a sonnet than for a ballad, and which has little benefit other than rounding off the poem with a sense of finality, and giving vague deference to the repeated phrase at the beginning of the last two lines of *Posledniy tost*.

The weak rhymes and repetition in the even-numbered lines of **Exhibit 4**, and the absence of rhyme in the remaining lines prompt the question of why the translator attempted rhyme at all: they seem forced and superfluous, and antithetical to the naturally flowing rhymes of *Posledniy tost*.

Overall, the vital quality of prosody in the original concedes much in all translations presented. If prosody is indeed as insoluble a problem for the translator as Meschonnic suggests, then we have adequate evidence of that here: harm is done in no small measure by the mere fact that form translates perhaps even less satisfyingly than diction: not only is life forfeited, but the order of a universe is overturned, the structure of things as they should be is disturbed, and form is lost.

3.2.2 WEAPONS, METHODS AND ACCESSORIES

We now examine the details of the evidence: the bloodied hands, the tools left at the crime scene (hammer and knife), the telltale footprints, and the wounds inflicted that cumulatively contributed to the cession of life. We scrutinise the strategies, tactics and methods employed by the perpetrators.

3.2.2.1 Wound: Conciseness

Pushkin in (Lednicki, 1952, p. 305) insists that “there is no more difficult and thankless task than to render Russian poems into French”; and this presumably because of the “compactness of the Russian language – one cannot be sufficiently brief”. The same would almost certainly apply to English, as miserable as French in its lack of inflection and relative poverty of prefixes. Whatever Brodsky’s assertion that Akhmatova translates easily into English²⁷, it is certainly not her economy with language that makes it so. Compound the celebrated economy

²⁷ See Section 3.1.2, above.

of language of the poet with a language that is in itself supremely economical, and the result is likely to be translations that are long-winded by comparison.

Whereas *Posledniy tost* is only 39 words long, excluding the title, our Exhibits manage 50, 59, 54 and 43 words respectively, without fully conveying all of the semantic content of the source text. That is not to say that word-count alone is the source of compact style, or that compactness cannot be communicated in a language that habitually uses more words than another to express an idea, but in translation one of the keys to Akhmatova's genius is not readily apparent to the reader.

In effect, the inevitable compromise of word-economy constitutes a grievous wound.

3.2.2.2 Wound: Sound quality

According to John Simon, "Russian poetry is a poetry of sound effects par excellence, because Russian is a sonorous, declamatory language" (1994, p. 2). Not only Akhmatova, but any Russian poet, stands to lose in sonority by being translated. We have previously made the case for²⁸ the difficulties that the sounds of Russian pose for the translator and how the dark, ironic mood of *Posledniy tost* owes much to its tonal elements and movement. It is sufficient to read the Exhibits, having listened to the sound clip of Akhmatova reading her own poem, to perceive the lack of tonal depth in the translations.

3.2.2.3 Blunt instrument: Punctuation

It is not apparent why the translator of Exhibit 2 chose to replace the dash at the end of line 4 with a comma: this violence seems gratuitous and unwarranted, except perhaps to drive home the choice to merge the two stanzas, thereby inflicting with the blunt instrument of punctuation a wound that has already caused significant structural damage.

²⁸ See Section 2.3

The semicolon of Exhibit 1 is less inappropriate than it may seem at first glance: the dash in Russian has specific connotations that it does not have in English, most often used in the present indicative to replace the verb “to be”. Its more universal use in poetry (leaving aside the characteristic dashes of Emily Dickinson) as a spacer, parenthesis or demonstrative indicator does not completely cover its employment in the fourth line of *Posledniy tost*. By inserting the dash (after a comma, it must be noted), Akhmatova inserts a caesura between the stanzas, forcing the reader to pause, but at the same time it effectively makes the first stanza the subject to the second stanza’s predicate, a connotation that only someone with a knowledge of Russian typography would understand, and impossible to render in the same way in English. A colon or semicolon in place of the dash goes further to reducing the semantic difference than a dash alone, and certainly more so than a comma.

3.2.2.4 Method: Lyricism

“Lyric poetry is the [poetic form] that has the most to lose [by translation]” (Simon, 1994, p. 1). Simon makes the case that it is lyricism, the *poésie des langues* (as opposed to *poésie des poètes*) that makes the poetry of Akhmatova totally untranslatable into English. As an Acmeist, Akhmatova had a quality of lyricism that revolted against the metaphysical lyricism of the Symbolists, but that inherited its eye for beauty and imagination; grounding beauty in the perception of the external world as things rather than as symbols, she gained the praise of her peers as a paragon of the Acmeist ideal, lyrically at least. Culturally, certainly in 1934, this resonated with Modernism, and is compatible with modern poetics, but that does not convey the impact of the innovative character of her brand of lyricism on the Russian poetry-consuming public of the time, comfortable as it was with Symbolism, or intrigued by the anti-lyricism and anarchistic poetics of the Futurists and Ego-Futurists, or placated (perhaps disgusted) by the saccharin warblings of the Proletcult.

Simon’s challenge does not seem so exceptionally insurmountable: a consequence of Symbolist lyricism is that its figures are mellifluously rich in culturally-specific association, whereas for Akhmatova a table is a table is a table. That the table is described in terms that render it poignant, malignant or delightful is the seat of her lyrical genius. The translator of Akhmatova is therefore not confronted by having to translate noisome metaphors that shed

precious layers of meaning as each term is translated, but is presented with a set of phenomena that are readily accessible, simple to link together, and able to gather to themselves associations that are explicitly present elsewhere in the poem.

A survey of the Exhibits reveals that the aforementioned form, compactness of style, and aural qualities are much more challenging to render in English. Each of the accused manages to convey an adequate lyrical sense through the literal components of their translation: as far as lyricism is concerned, this is where the least damage is done.

3.2.2.5 Identity theft: The Poetic I

Poetic voice and the poetic I are complex and problematic constructs. The “I” poet and the “I” narrator take on an intricate relationship in the first-person narrated poem. Contrary to many of the I’s in the poetry of Akhmatova’s contemporaries, the I of ‘The Last Toast’ is not the egocentric first person of the Ego-Futurist, which actively breaks the boundary between poet and poetic discourse, but neither is it a word in the mouth of a third person totally distinct from the poet. We have already mentioned the Acmeist persona as one that is constructed for public consumption, as opposed to revealing the most intimate personality of the poet. The I of ‘The Last Toast’ is an ego that is mythologised, posed, distilled, sublimated. But most of all, it is an I that has a concrete identity, however transient. What happens when that I is taken out of its direct association with Anna Andreevna Akhmatova, and mediated by a D. M. Thomas, a Lyn Coffin?

To answer that question, let us first examine the construction of the ego in *Posledniy tost*.

Russian commonly elides the first person singular nominative, but it is made explicit twice in the poem. For a poet of such renowned terseness, this has to be significant. The first person also makes an explicit appearance in the genitive (or accusative: the ambiguity is key, and will be dealt with later) case in line 5. While this pronoun is not elided in Russian, its inclusion is significant, because the phrase would make perfect sense without it, and be considerably less ambiguous. Less contentiously, but as revealing of the presence of the first person narrator, is the possessive pronoun *moyu* in line 2.

The possible reason for this definite presence may simply be the accident of the single-syllable *ya* (I) forming the unstressed component of the fundamental iambic foot, and thus constituting a happy coincidence. Some detractors of the Akhmatova cult might hastily point out that it could be an indicator of the poet's notorious and enormous vanity (or narcissism), but alternatively it could be rooted in the Acmeist's creation of the lyrical persona. More generously, it may be construed as a revindication of the "I" silenced by the Soviet regime.

Whatever the reason, the narrator makes her (clearly feminine) presence felt, and sets up a relationship with the poet that is inescapable, bringing three personas into play – narrator, poet-as-persona, and poet-as-person. Should the poem be read aloud by a third party, a further compounding takes place, in which the speaking-I simultaneously aligns itself with and distinguishes itself from those three personas. When a translator tackles such a poem, the pronouncement of the word "I" takes on two additional personas, those of the translator and of the poet-translated.

Neither of the third level of personas (translator and poet-translated) can be seen to be true to the first level, and in effect obscure the first level, being more immediate to the reader of the translation. A theft, or at the very least, an obfuscation, of the identities embedded in the original has therefore taken place, tantamount to robbing the individual of his or her integrity as a being, and therefore to homicide.

Line 3 of each of the Exhibits exposes an inaccuracy common to all of them by introducing the first person plural where there is none in the source text ("The isolation that *we* share"; "the loneliness *we together* enjoyed"; "*our* shared loneliness", and "*our* loneliness together"). Admittedly, the original construction is one of the most difficult in the whole poem to render elegantly in English, but the narrator makes no more than an oblique implication that the "*odinnochestvo vdvoyom*" refers specifically to herself and another: she drinks simply to "shared loneliness as a couple" or, in an alternative interpretation, "the solitude of an individual within a couple". That this type of relationship has been her own experience is beyond doubt, but it may equally include all couples in such a relationship or situation. Here, the translators have added an explicit persona to the mix, compounding the theft of identity.

Exhibit 4 takes the addition of a persona even further in line 6, by replacing the first person singular in the source text with “us”. Again, the Russian construction of this line does not lend itself to easy translation, but the difficulty lies in the uncertainty of whether the lie is directed at or originated by the narrator, not in the narrator’s constitution as a single being. If this construction by the translator is for the expedient of rhyme, then it is particularly disingenuous, in that the rhyme created is a repetition of the same word, and therefore weak.

3.2.2.6 *Twisting the knife: Diction*

Osers (1978, pp. 7-8) maintains that the core or “tension” (the “extra charge”) of heightened discourse (poetry, in the absence of metered or rhymed verse) is precisely in what the Russian Formalists called *ostranenie* or “making strange”. For him, the poetic text “represents a deliberate choice from among possible options”. He does not tackle the problem of such a charge arising in prose, which it most certainly may be proven to do, but he does see the problem of translating this “charge” as being central to the problem of translating poetry.

So much for the source text, in which the translator finds choices already made: the work of choosing form, rhyme, rhythm, figures and diction is already done, and these choices constitute the living poem. But if the translator (as translators do) sets out to commit the crime of homicide on the poem, he or she has to select the tools and devices by which the crime will be committed and the living body of the original substituted with its zombie look-alike. Each element of the poem has to be substituted as far as possible, and this implies selection, a “deliberate choice from among” a whole new linguistic set of possible options. The choice of whether to copy or depart from the original form is a relatively simple one (even if it has complex implications); punctuation requires selection from a tiny set of options, and the adoption of a poet’s voice is a choice already made by the decision to translate. It is in diction that the translator is confronted with a virtually limitless set of options, and where the smallest wounds inflicted can be compounded into a massacre.

The inability of languages to mirror each other exactly means that no selection of words can be exact; it is impossible to communicate the precise meaning of the original, so the translator is forced to substitute what will hopefully pass as an acceptable equivalent. The translator

also has to be deeply attuned in each selection not only to the sense of the word itself, but what impact that will have on the formal aspects of the translated product, and whether or not that impact is desirable. The differences between individual words (ignoring syntax and grammar) in our four Exhibits reveal deliberate selections made at the level of diction, in an effort to transmit as clearly as possible the effect created by the deliberate selections made by Anna Akhmatova when she wrote the original poem.

A quick survey of the first line of each Exhibit reveals four different translations of one simple word: “past all repair”; “(already) destroyed”; “ruined”, and “demolished”. It is surely not necessary to point out that each of these words or phrases has different connotations and slightly different meanings, each of them roughly, none of them exactly, corresponding to the Russian adjective “*razoryonniy*”. “Past all repair” negates the possibility of rebuilding the edifice, which the others do not; “destroyed” and “demolished” indicate a necessary agency to the destruction that is more equivocal in the other two selections, while “ruined” has connotations of having been irreparably spoiled or soiled (from within or without), or degraded by time. The addition of the qualifier “already” in Exhibit 2 lends a perfective, and possibly redundant, aspect to the word. None of them manage to capture the specific sense or essence of *razoryonniy*, whose prefix (*raz-*, indicating separation or distribution) lends a specific character not translatable in the same paradigm into English. Attempting a lexical equivalent based on the meanings of the prefix and root adjective would result in the word “dis-ordered”, which does not carry the same semantic meaning of the compound word at all.

We must also bear in mind that in Russian a word may have different connotations and meanings, depending on the context in which it is used: semantics are never absolute.

Rather than picking on each word in the Exhibits, we will concentrate on those that are especially problematic, or that stand out as having a marked significance.

The title poses two problems. The less fraught of these is the selection of the word “final” (Exhibit 1), as opposed to “last”, as used in all of the other Exhibits. These two words are synonymous in English, but not completely equivalent, the key difference being the connotation of “previous” in “last”, as in: “The last time she made toast, it was burned; let’s

hope that this time it will not be charred”. “Final” makes it clear that there will be no more to follow, at least for an indeterminate time period (“That was the last toast of the evening, it having been preceded by others, but there may be more toasts tomorrow evening”). Considering the root of the Russian word *posledniy*, which contains the base *sled-* (“next” or “following”), then “last” may be more accurate, but we have already seen that deriving English words from the etymology of the Russian can be misleading. So which of the two meanings did Akhmatova intend in selecting that word? It is impossible to know: the ambiguity may have been deliberate on her part, or it may simply arise when we are considering the possible selections that can be made when translating the phrase into English. A further option, not selected by any of the translators, would have been ‘The Ultimate Toast’.²⁹

Still considering the title: Russian poses a specific grammatical challenge to the translator in that it does not have articles, definite or indefinite. Is Akhmatova referring to “*a* last toast”, “*the* last toast”, or simply “last toast”? Whereas the distinction for the poet was not necessarily important, it is very important to the translator into English, a language that demands satisfaction on the ambiguity of this point. Akhmatova (by no means ignorant of languages with definite and indefinite articles), would conceivably have weighed up the alternative of “*odin posledniy tost*” (*one* last toast), but remains resolutely ambiguous, perhaps not to herself, but certainly to the translator of her poem into English. Each of our translators, forced to make a choice, has settled on “the”, choosing to fix the action as unique, but ‘A Final Toast’ would have been no further from the original sense of the title than ‘The Last Toast’, even though the semantic difference between the alternatives is considerable. Indeed, ‘A Final Toast’ certainly appears to me to be the more lyrical of the two, if a mite more sentimental. That said, there is no lack of sentimentality, ironic or otherwise, in the

²⁹ Indeed, it was not after all the final toast, for Akhmatova published the poem *Yeshyo tost* (‘Another toast’) in 1961-3. See <http://mitridat.bos.ru/poetry/spl/trilist.htm>

poem, and the latter phrase is possibly more likely to be used by a depressed and maudlin wretch who has been systematically “toasting” all evening (the sense that this is not the first toast not being at all alien to the poem).

Already, just in the title, we have evidence of the damage done to the living poem by translation. This is not a consequence of malice on the translator’s part (the judgement tends to manslaughter, rather than murder), but merely the upshot of languages simply not being equivalent in respect of diction or meaning.

It is interesting that none of the Exhibits use the word “home”, rather than “house” in line 1. “House” is the most immediate and literal translation of the Russian *dom*, but “home” embraces a broader semantic field. Perhaps it is in response to Akhmatova’s Acmeism and rejection of Symbolist metaphysics that persuades the translators not to select an alternative that is more abstract and more symbolic. The word “house” is still free to gather any associations with family or homeland that “home” may have, while remaining lexically true to the text. However, none of the associations of “home” are in conflict with the general meaning of the poem, or with the circumstances of Akhmatova’s life until 1935. Two of her marriages had collapsed, several lovers had jilted her or been jilted, her son’s future was uncertain, she was living in penury with the Mandelstams, and many of her friends and colleagues had been executed, had committed suicide, or had emigrated. Those of her fellow poets who had remained in Russia had become “internal emigrants”³⁰. Russia herself, and her cultural life, had undergone overwhelming political, social and economic change, and the relative comfort of Akhmatova’s childhood, youth and early adulthood were so alien as to be unrecognisable in current circumstances. Household and homeland had been destroyed, ruined, demolished, literally or figuratively. Even considering the symbolic connotations of “home”, it seems lexically less abstract in this context than “house”: the edifices that

³⁰ A phrase employed by Kaun to describe those poets who remained in Russia after 1917, but refused to pander to the aesthetic demands of the new regime.

Akhmatova had considered home were quite likely still standing, although she had been removed from them. At a more figurative level, even Akhmatova's physical body, the house of her soul (the I-poet, and the I-constructed persona), had been undermined by tuberculosis, severe bronchitis, heart ailments and thyroid disease, not made any better by near-starvation, smoking, and of course alcohol.

In passing, we should note that the word "life" has been totally omitted from line 2 of Exhibit 4, even though its Russian equivalent is explicitly, unambiguously and quite concretely employed in the original text.

And now we must tackle the vexed issue of line 3: the lyrical, concise and precise, but deeply ambiguous, oxymoron of "solitude-as/in-two". The sheer genius of the poet, in taking two incidental and common words, and casually juxtaposing them so that their patently visible roots (*odin*, "one" and *dva*, "two" – highlighted by the unstressed "o" of "*vdvoyóm*" being especially diminished by the soft "yo" and therefore spoken as "a": even closer in sound to the root word) clash with the cataclysmic creative force of tectonic plates, is hard to match in poetic sensibility, or to describe in (let alone translate into) English. Aurally, the phrase is no less impactful, tottering blithely from weak vowels, *ch*'s, and double-*n*'s, through an event horizon of the three juxtaposed consonants "-vo vdv-", and into a black hole that engobbles all other words and all surrounding matter, even light, finishing off with a monstrous *m* of satisfaction. That this last word is an adverb, rather than an adjective describing the noun, (identical in construction to our old friend the predicative instrumental inflection), habitually considered a weak part of speech in poetry, makes the oxymoron that much more succulent. If this preceding paragraph strikes the jury as overwrought and turgid, let it be known that it is merely my attempt to communicate the power and elegance of the original figure.

For the sake of justice, I will attempt to give a dog-trot translation of that single line, translating only its lexical meaning, without the sound effects or compactness that make it peerless and give no small measure of life to the poem:

To the (or a) oneness/loneliness/solitude that *is*, by being brought about by/through two (people) together.

That complex and clumsy phrase is rendered in just three simple words in Russian. Small wonder, then, that the translators have resorted to such tame locutions as “the isolation that we share”, “the loneliness we together enjoyed”, etc. And we have not yet begun to address the rich ambiguity of the phrase.

What all of the translations in our Exhibits fail to impart effectively is the dual thrust of the line. The solitude may be interpreted as one enjoyed (as Exhibit 2 will have it) and engendered by the intimacy of a couple (of friends, lovers, spouses), excluding the outside world to pleasant or unpleasant effect for one or both parties. In the latter case, the enjoyment would of course be ironic, barring emotional masochism or Schadenfreude. On the other hand, it may also be taken to be the isolation and loneliness experienced by one or both members of the couple, *despite* their intimacy. The lack of an article (a or the), although inescapable on the poet’s part, lends further equivocation to the phrase: the raiser of the toast may be referring to a relationship in particular, or to couple-relationships in general.

The poet makes no effort to resolve this ambiguity, and so we find the translators compelled to kill off one whole train of meaning in the poem.

Let us now consider the lyric thou of line 4 (placed in line 3 of Exhibit 4): The problem of register is one common to translation into English, and one that is cited by numerous theorists, including Osers. Most immediately, it arises in the lack of a formal second person pronoun, and the lack of a distinction between second persons plural and singular (in regular modern English usage at least, ignoring the colloquial constructions “youse” and “y’all”). In translation of many languages into English there is a subduction of persons into the pronoun “you” (effectively constituting homicide), or very often a subduction of a formal singular into a sometimes formal, sometimes informal pronoun “you”. In either case explicit persons (or bodies social) are actively either destroyed or undermined by being made, at the most vaguely, implicit.

Even in the case where a Russian *ty* (second person singular) is translated into an English *you*, which may potentially be plural, there is a possible adding of instances of life-force to

the individual in making it plural. However, in that dis-individuation lies precisely the murder of the single individual's individuality.

Even between European languages, translation of register is not a simple case of translating between from plural formal form to plural formal form, as conventions differ according to situation (the French *vous* is in many respects not used in the same circumstances as the German *Sie*). That dynamic does not apply here, but it is worth noting for eventual studies of a like interest to this one.

Gender may pose similar quandaries to the translator. Osers (1978, p. 14) quotes the case of translating a poem of Heine from German into Russian, where the gender of the words for inanimate objects (trees) described has an erotic charge, irretrievable in Russian if the same trees are named, because the names of both of those trees in Russian are masculine. The translator into Russian has the alternative of selecting the names of different trees, but in that case there are certain properties of or associations with those trees that would be lost. That loss may not be completely bereaving, or may leave a poem possibly less bereft than one may think, because such associations or allusions may not carry the same cultural weight between languages, common symbolism being as transient between languages as common meanings.

Even for English, gender-neutral for common nouns, the problem arises of translating into a language that deprives an object or concept of reflected gender (reflected by its linguistic accident, not by an inherent property of the object or concept) that may carry some meaning in a poem, if seldom in prose.

Gender of common nouns in poetry has a further aspect in that verbal, pronominal or adjectival accord will often create the useful device of masculine and feminine rhymes, as in the case of the feminine possessive pronominal at the end of line 2 providing a rhyme for line 4 of *Posledniy tost*, or an ending dispensable for the sake of rhythm or rhyme (line 6, where the adjectival ending of "cold" is suppressed to maintain metre and reinforce concision).

Although line 5 is not as oxymoronic or as grammatically as complex as line 3, its construction raises an ambiguity that once again taxes the translator's options for alternatives, or otherwise forces the destruction of a train of meaning by selecting one alternative over the other. The source of the ambiguity is the word "*menya*", which at first sight would seem to be the accusative case of the first person singular: (at/to me), giving the translation of the line in dog-trot as "to my being lied to by betraying lips". The assertion is that the falsehood is generated by a second party. The ambiguity arises in that "*menya*" is also the genitive form of the pronoun, which changes the meaning to "to my lie from betraying lips"; the narrator-persona is herself doing the lying.

All of our Exhibits succeed in rendering ambiguity in their translation of this line, and quite effectively so, as the first reading is superficially clear, but closer examination does raise the question of who is doing the lying. Even though in all Exhibits the construction places the accusative stress on the object ("betrayed/betraying me/us"), the ambiguity is carried in English by the agency remaining the subject, rather than by the inflection of the pronoun, but leaving that subject (the owner of the lips) unidentified: simultaneously "I have been betrayed by lips other than my own"; and "I am betrayed by my own lips".

We have already discussed the unconvincing rationale of Exhibit 4's use of the first person plural, rather than singular in this line (providing a rhyme for line 6). Perhaps it can be further motivated by association with the ambiguity of line 3, but the connection does not seem strong enough, nor the Exhibit 4's reflection of line 3's ambiguity, to warrant acquittal.

The final two lines of the poem provide a sort of couplet-in-reverse, repeating the first two words of each line: this is a clear example of Akhmatova using her "blessedness of repetition" to good effect – not overdoing it, but rounding off the poem by adding a further repetition to the repetition of the word "*za*" in each line. Only Exhibit 3 manages this in translation, but with the comparatively verbose "To the fact that..." repeated over these two lines.

To this blessedness Akhmatova brings an added virtue of a syntactical oxymoron, giving a contrast to the repetition by in the first instance making the demonstrative particle and

relative pronoun (*to, chto*) refer to a substantive with no verb, which is quite unusual, while in the next line she makes the same construction refer to a verbal phrase or quasi-gerund, which is more in keeping with standard syntax. The reader, taken aback by the unusual construction of line 7, is then presented with a different paradigmatic construction, but introduced with the same three words. In the sameness of repetition, Akhmatova strengthens her argument with a differential contrast. Even in literal translation, those two lines lack the precision of the impact created: “To this, that world cruel and crude/ To this, that God did not save” (the difference hinging on the subtly different meanings of the demonstrative “that”). A link between line 7 and 8 is also established, suggesting that that which God has not saved is the cruel world, but not exclusively: the exact object of God’s lack of salvation remaining ambiguous, general, and in balance. I doubt that there is for this instance a weapon in the English translator’s arsenal that the poet herself would select as a satisfactory instrument of her (or her poem’s) own demise.

That the last line leaves the reader somewhat dissatisfied is perfectly in keeping with the tone of deep sarcasm, and an indication of the lack and impossibility of redemption for everything that has gone before. Exhibit 4 introduces an “us” that does not appear in the source text. While it is at least ambiguous (it could refer to a generic “us”, or to a specific couple), it does still add a persona not explicitly intended by the poet, thereby denigrating the single identity of the poet persona, and constituting a subduction of identity that we have highlighted before.

In including all and everything in the impossibility of salvation, the poet precludes redemption even for the translator who undertakes a translation of this poem.

3.2.3 SUMMATION: THE BUTLER DID IT

D.M. Thomas, a renowned translator of Russian poetry, and translator of Akhmatova’s poetry (in fact, the author of Exhibit 4) specifically gives us an undramatic insight into his strategies for resolving translation difficulties in the Introduction to his volume of translations of selected Akhmatova poems:

I have tried to keep as closely to her sense as is compatible with making a poem in English; and the directness of her art encourages this approach. The geniuses of the Russian language and the English language often walk together...; but they also sometimes clash, and there are times when it is a deeper betrayal of the original poem to keep close to the literal sense than it would be to seek an English equivalent – one that preserves, maybe, more of her music... Striving to be true to Akhmatova implies, with equal passion, striving to be true to poetry. When I have found it necessary to depart from a close translation, I have sought never to betray the tone and spirit of her poem, but to imagine how she might have solved a particular problem had she been writing in English. (Akhmatova & Thomas, 1988)

In this alibi, Thomas despite himself exposes his guilt, his betrayal, his atrocities, but tries to justify them, imploring the reader to show mercy and consider the translator's desire to remain true to the spirit of the poem. He pleads in his favour that he approaches the murder as if he first considers the victim's point of view, stealing her identity and asking himself-as-her: "If I were to commit suicide, how would I choose to do it?", and then acts upon his answer. Does that make the crime less wicked? Is it grounds for acquittal? Is there an alternative to the judgement of manslaughter at the very least?

Alternatives: What are the alternatives to murder? What are the alternatives for murder? (Poison, direct physical harm, in public, in private...) Oser suggests that the translator of poetry should examine the alternatives that were available to the poet, and then consider the alternatives available to the translator, for it is in the choice of one alternative over another (in diction and in syntax and in register) that the poet has succeeded in rendering the mundane as strange. The selection of the most surprising possible alternative is the clincher for the selection. The greater challenge, then, is lack of availability of alternatives in the target language.

We have proof beyond reasonable doubt of prima facie guilt on the part of all three perpetrators against whom we have gathered evidence. We have presented a convincing case that the translation of poetry constitutes the wilful and premeditated taking of life, and given some measure of evidence of the ways in which the translators in our Exhibits have done so.

But there is one guilty party, Honourable Judge, ladies and gentlemen of the Jury, whom we have neglected, whose guilt has been staring us in the face: a persona that has planned meticulously, inflicted and poked innumerable wounds, and subtly dis-integrated the structural integrity of the body and identity of poem and poet; an entity as guilty as the others accused, but whose guilt is all the more despicable for hiding behind an appearance of virtue and concern for justice.

“The butler did it” is a strong cultural meme³¹ born of the formulaic nature of detective fiction. Discreet, internal, loyal, and keeping up appearances, maintaining good form, the butler is the ultimate servant of virtue, and at first glance the least likely suspect in a murder. But after all, it is the butler who is privy to the household’s comings and goings, who is accustomed to making his presence invisible, and to a presenting a veneer of respectability and trust on behalf of himself and his employers. In prosecuting his duties, the butler is the ultimate advocate of decency and discretion. The butler does not judge or criticise, but when asked will give an honest but impeccably tactful opinion.

In Agatha Christie’s novel *Curtain : Poirot’s Last Case* (Christie, 1975) it is not the butler who committed the crime, but Hercule Poirot himself, the irreproachable little Belgian detective who uses his “little grey cells” to recreate, investigate and ultimately solve the mystery of the crimes that seem to happen with alarming regularity in his presence.

In summation I propose a toast to Hercule Poirot and to his last case. This is not the last toast, for I also propose a toast to the four translators who have served our case by providing Exhibits for examination: their crimes, deplorable as they are, were executed with masterful cunning and with noble motives. Lastly, in the spirit of Anna Akhmatova toasting herself and her own crimes, I toast the butler, the butler who did it, too.

³¹ A phrase attributed to the crime writer Mary Roberts Rinehart (1876-1958), although she did not use it. (Wikipedia, n.d.)

As a student of this poem by Anna Akhmatova and in doing service to its integrity and outwardly to its good form, I have gained an intimacy with and deep knowledge of the text that few others can claim. I have become familiar with its caprices, its brilliance, its tiniest faults, the circumstances of its history, and every scar, every wound inflicted on its person. I have been dutiful in service to it, self-effacing, and doing my best to speak on behalf of its standing. As butler, posing as a Hercule Poirot, I have acted as both advocate and prosecutor in the case of its murder. And now I confess, myself, to the same crime of which I have accused the four souls that I trust you will find it in your hearts to absolve.

Habeo corpus. Mea culpa.

As plea in my defence, I will claim, as all other translators of poetry will, that I have at all times attempted to remain as true to the text as I could. In my efforts I have aimed to retain above all the aural impact of the poem, sticking as closely to the sounds of the original lines as possible. Yes, there have been the inevitable and usual casualties: some elements of form have naturally suffered and been killed off: I was unable to do more than approximate the ballad form, and was forced to interrupt the thematic flow of lines 5,6 and 7. I subsume all poetic personas into my own; my diction is inexact, the syntax and rhythm sometimes forced. I have added meanings, connotations and associations, and I have dispensed with others. I am however, characteristically for a murderer, they say, quite proud of at least one part of my crime: my rendering, with instruments both keen and blunt, of that wretched predicative instrumental:

Pissed: Last Toast

‘Up yours!’ I say, to this razed domain of mud,
And my louche old being: to you,
This threesome that is loneliness, shared blood,

Oh, and I drink to You – you too;

Here's to my world, which has seen its arse,

To lies lodged in my ravaged gob,

To mournful eyes, cold, dead as glass,

To the fact that God's a slob.

University of Cape Town

4 CONCLUSION

4.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This study starts by correlating the translation of poetry with the taking of human life. The similarity between the two acts is founded on a conception of poetry as having or being representative of “life”, and determining to what extent this abstraction is valid. The comparison has three components:

- the vivacity or allure of poetry, which may be seen as a life-force, or at least a life-affirming force;
- the physical manifestation of the poetic text as a living body, and
- the identity of the poet (as an individual human being, as narrator of a text, and as persona) constituting a human identity.

Having established the attribute of life for poetry, the review explores the similarities between a hypothetical murder (in the context of detective fiction) and translation of poetry, equating the physical, moral and contextual phenomena of both.

After the conclusion that there are indeed grounds for the comparison, four different translations of a single poem are compared in detail, and their tactics for transformation of the source text into another language are examined as a detective would examine evidence in detective fiction. Each translated text is demonstrated to have wilfully interfered with the life qualities outlined in the previous section, and the tactics used for translation are demonstrated to be comparable to the physical, moral and contextual affront to the life of the original poem. A fifth translation of the poem, by the author of this study, provides yet another example, in relation to the other texts analysed, of the impossibility of adequately representing in another language the life-qualities of any particular poem.

4.2 REVIEW OF APPROACH TAKEN

In setting out to impose an abstract construct on a review or analysis (such as the translation of poetry as homicide), the researcher necessarily risks losing comprehensiveness, or forgoing quantitative objectivity toward the subject matter. The potential for getting caught up in the spirit of the argument, rather than the letter thereof, and thereby ignoring its weaknesses or inadequacies, is high.

Nevertheless, just as poets resort to metaphor to expand the semantic capabilities of language, a researcher may define something in terms of something else, in order to bring across a point elegantly and succinctly. It is up to both poet and researcher to be responsible and judicious in the application of referents that contribute to sense-making, rather than distracting from the ultimate purpose. The effectiveness of a metaphor lies in the poet acknowledging the differences between the referents, while using their commonalities to good effect.

The differences between the acts of homicide and translation of poetry are innumerable, and the motives and moral consequences of each completely irreconcilable. But the shared associations have hopefully shed light on the subject without distracting from the purpose, which was ultimately to interrogate the nature of translation of poetry, concluding that the translation of a poem must not be regarded as substantively equivalent to the original version in its original language.

4.3 OPPORTUNITIES AND INDICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Any academic study necessarily omits, by accident or by design, some important considerations, many of which arise in the course of the study and which the author is not able to pursue. Some of the items listed below captured my interest, but could not be comprehensively dealt with in the space or time available. There were others that I recognised as significant before or during the study, but was unable to pursue for various reasons.

1. Self-citation in the oeuvre of Anna Akhmatova: Numerous scholars of Akhmatova's poetry have mentioned self-citation as characteristic of her work. A simple example applicable to the present work is her 1961/3 poem 'Another toast'. I am not sufficiently familiar with the broad sweep of the poet's work in Russian to be able to give a fuller account of self-citation in individual lines, but I feel that a thoroughly competent translator of her work would be aware of the hermetic intertextualities, and be able to make the reader aware of them in any large selection of translations of her poetry. Apart from a purely semantic influence that this may have on Akhmatova's poetry and the context of each poem, it has some bearing on the discussion regarding her construction of self in her writing, and on the alleged egotism of which many accuse her.
2. The stanza break: It may be impossible to determine conclusively if a definitive imprint exists of *Posledniy tost*, and whether or not it contains the stanza break between lines 4 and 5. Translations available to me in many languages are roughly equally divided between placing or not placing the break. The texts of the poem available in Russian on the Internet appear to favour the break, although the one authoritative source published in Russia that I was able to find, with the kind assistance of the University of Michigan, (a reprint dated 1983) omits it. None of the translators have glossed its absence or presence, and one can assume that they were working from one of at least two different imprints of the text. I only became aware of the possible superior authority of the "non-break" version after I had written the relevant section of the present study, and did not feel that it was worth undoing the work already done, especially in the absence of a more convincing argument against it. It remains to conduct, with resources not available to me at present, more extensive research into this matter, which could possibly be sufficient to constitute a study on its own.
3. Some attention is given in this essay to the construct of the poet's persona as a victim of homicide, but there are implications of this that could be more fully dealt with. The extent and complexity of both the phenomenon and the related research would certainly merit further study, especially given the specifics of the lyric persona of Acmeism, which presents as very specific case in poetics. The Acmeist lyric persona

is distinct from its contemporaries, and distinct in its use of figure, inserting itself into the text as both persona and as figure; as observed by Doherty: “Akhmatova’s heroine, combining in herself a whole series of events, scenes and feelings, is ‘oxymoron’ incarnate” (1995, p. 199).

4. The discussion of the “scene of the crime” warrants a more thorough consideration of Plato’s chora, and in-depth review of subsequent writing on the topic, particularly that of Julia Kristeva. The ineffable “space” in which poetry and the poetry of the translation of poetry take place constitutes at least two levels of abstraction that have a direct relation to a crime scene: as the locale of the original poesy that is violated by translation, and the locale in which the translator exercises his/her poetic faculties to produce the translation. A feminist reading of chora would also not be out of place in the argument, especially when dealing with Anna Akhmatova, the lone definitive female voice of Acmeism.
5. Anna Akhmatova is known to have translated poetry into Russian, but I was unable to trace any commentary on her translations: whether or not they were particularly competent, or even if any publication exists today of poetry known to have been translated by her. It would be interesting at least, if not revealing of some information of consequence to this study, to examine her translations and to seek out her attitude and approach to the translation of poetry. No record can be found of her response, if any exists, to the translations of her own poetry.

I would hope that the nature of this work and its findings will find relevance beyond the narrow scope of its subject matter, and that it has contributed in some small way to the discourse on translation of poetry.

5 APPENDIX

I. ANNA AKHMATOVA: BIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE

1889 – Born Anna Andreevna Gorenko, near Odessa. Moved soon afterward to St Petersburg area.

1905 – Parents separated.

1907 – First poem published in Nikolai Gumilev's journal *Sirius*.

1910 – Married Nikolai Gumilev. Formation of the Guild of Poets (Acmeist school).

1912 – Birth of her son, Lev Gumilev, and publication of her first book of verse.

1917-1918 – Revolution in St Petersburg, and beginning of exodus of Russian poets, artists and intelligentsia to Europe. Akhmatova decided to remain in Russia.

1918 – Divorced Gorenko, after numerous affairs, rumoured affairs and extramarital relationships. These included Osip Mandelstam, Boris Pasternak, Aleksandr Blok and Boris Anrep. Married Vladimir Shileiko. Affairs with Mikhail Zimmerman and Arthur Lourié.

1921 – Prosecution and execution of Nikolai Gumilev, which also brought the Acmeist movement to an end.

ca. 1922 – Start of civil union with Nikolai Punin (until 1935)

1925 – Restriction on publication of Akhmatova's original poetry. She continued to work on translations, essays and criticism.

1925-41 – Suicide of Esenin, Mayakovsky and Marina Tsetaeva.

1935 – *Posledniy tost* written.

1937-38 – Stalin's Great Purge. Akhmatova placed under surveillance by the authorities.

1934-38 – Osip Mandelstam arrested and sent to a prison camp, where he died.

1939 – First (grudgingly) approved publication of Akhmatova's poetry since the restriction.

1942-44 – Evacuation from St Petersburg, eventually to Taskhent. On returning to Leningrad, she stayed with the Punin family, with whom she lodged until her death.

1949-56 – Arrest and incarceration of Lev Gumilev.

1956-58 – Official "rehabilitation", publication and acceptance of Akhmatova's poetry.

1962-1965 – Increasing official acceptance, and increasing freedom to travel and receive foreign visitors. Awarded Etna-Taormina prize and honorary doctorate from Oxford University.

1966 – Death in Moscow from heart failure.

II. FULL TEXTS OF CITED TRANSLATIONS OF THE ORIGINAL POEM

Lyn Coffin:

THE LAST TOAST

I drink to the house, already destroyed,
And my whole life, too awful to tell,
To the loneliness we together enjoyed,
I drink to you as well,
To the eyes with deathly cold imbued,
To the lips that betrayed me with a lie,
To the world for being cruel and rude,
To God who didn't save us, or try.

(Akhmatova & Coffin, 1983)

Judith Henschmeyer:

The Last Toast

I drink to the ruined house,
To the evil of my life,
To our shared loneliness
And I drink to you –
To the lie of lips that betrayed me,
To the deadly coldness of the eyes,
To the fact that the world is cruel and depraved,
The fact that God did not save.

(Akhmatova & Reeder, 1992)

D. M. Thomas:

The Last Toast

I drink to our demolished house,
To all this wickedness,
To you, our loneliness together,
I raise my glass –

And to the dead-cold eyes,
The lie that has betrayed us,
The coarse, brutal world, the fact
The God has not saved us.

(Akhmatova & Thomas, 1988)

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The Art of Dying

/

Binnedeur

Richard Higgs – HGGRIC003



A portfolio of creative work (poetry) submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Masters in Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities
University of Cape Town
September 2012

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:_____ Date:_____

University of Cape Town

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I.

THE ART OF DYING

MY FATHER, THIS WINTER

Dead longer now than he had lived,
forgotten-half, legacy gives
out pallid rays: forgiven sin,
a presence craved, resentment's skin –
his shadow of a widow grieves

no more: she's joined the winnowed sheaves
in the album's fallen leaves:
all those now at peace with him
(dead longer now

than them). I do want to believe
that this winter I will leave
a husk or two: I may begin
to find the orphan-me within
the "I" of child-hood thus reprieved,
half-dead as long

as I have lived.

MISSING LINK - CECIL HIGGS

Confronted by 'Cassis' I search
for the man-named famous aunt I never knew
in impasto streaks of titanium white,
(the inner shells she painted
are too labial,
the nudes too labile
to be familial).

I try to trace a genealogy
like: Marjorie Wallace - Jan Rabie - Uys Krige...
but by now I'm on the distaff side,
and at every attempt the yarn runs dead
somewhere between Hoopstad and Onrus,
and twists and squirls
into charcoaled mitochondria:
'Still Life with Kelp',
'Drowned Gull'.

She frustrates the space for me
she created once for Boerneef:
her Alzheimer-white beehive
no more than taciturn sculpture,

but then I notice
an astonished fleck of pink
in an ever-breaking wave.



Cecil Higgs, *Cassis* (1965-7), oil on canvas

Reprinted from: Bertram, D., 1994. *Cecil Higgs – Close-up*, Johannesburg: William Waterman Publications, p. 96.

Included in source courtesy of Mrs Huberte Rupert. Photo credit: Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation, Stellenbosch.

EDITH SITWELL ALSO HAD MARFAN SYNDROME

I claim

your gangly grace, your soulful

ugliness. You, cousin Plantagenet, hiding your doleful

face in words, in rhythm:

I've known those bitter loves,

those heartfelt places

where ligaments and sinews

stretch out, inelastic,

to quarked qualities

of space.

As your eyes glossed

to glaucous marbles and the pace

of heartbeats sprung at their own metric;

as too-long fingers grazed

the haze of oil-lamps at dusk,

I've prayed with you,

to goddesses and gods

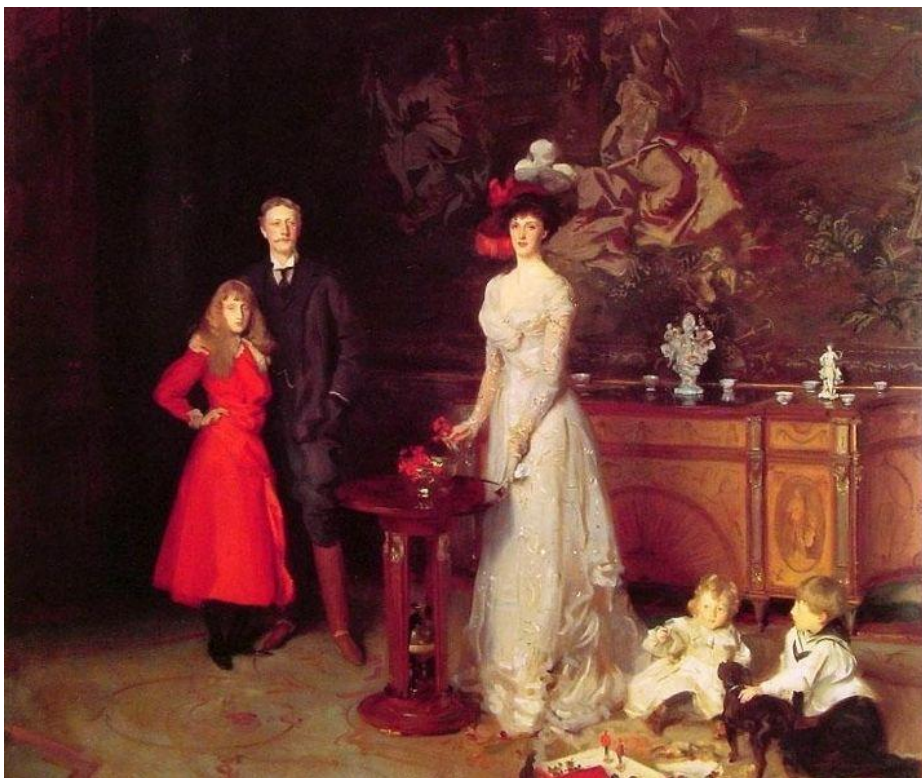
that we both know,

that Singer Sargent saw

when we were just thirteen,

in angles and defiant angels

peering over your twisted shoulders
ironed to the cross the father made one wear.
I swear by one distorted gene,
our double-helix-bond in words
turned to the noblest duty:
I know this place
we've seen.



John Singer Sargent, *The Sitwell Family* (ca. 1900)

Public domain. Photo credit: untraceable.

Edith Sitwell on far left.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sargent_-_Familie_Sitwell.jpg (accessed 14 August 2012)

A POLE APART

for Wisława Szymborska, 2 July 1923 – 1 February 2012

In this first week of February
while we meltdown torrid in the chocolate South
and your compatriots are buried
under snowdrifts ready
for you to distil
to an isotope of Curium,
reactive enough
to boil blood

your absence as tangible
as lacunas between sublime
and headscarfed homeliness reminds me
to hang up for a moment my white-hot spite
at the perfect enjambment,
the just metre, the nuclear understatement,
and soar.

IN MEMORIAM - REZA DE WET

*Если только можно, Авва Отче,
Чашу эту мимо пронеси.*

-Boris Pasternak: 'Гамлет'

*If it is at all possible, Abba, Father,
Take this cup from me.*

- Boris Pasternak: 'Hamlet'

Ek verkyk my aan alle kante van jou verhoog:
staan in die vleuels en waag geen beweging nie.
Een na die ander ontplof 'n gedrukte komma
op soek na Tsjekof en nog 'n dieper grond,
totdat gordyne die stiltes tussen woorde inasem;
al smeeek hy om in die duister te bly,
belig ek self die spook van Eugène Marais.

Dan van die groenkamer af,
waar ek en jy skuilhou,
hoor ons die onseker applous.
Sodra die saal ten slotte leeg is
en die gehoor al in die bed lê,
illusies op hul retinas gekerf,
dans my skadu alleen
in 'n wêreld wat jy agterlaat.

THE QUIET VISITOR (EUGÈNE N. MARAIS)

In a corner he sits,
chairing a solitary confederation
with his iris, his scapula, his stapes,
his sternum, his septum.
One foot is on the cushion of the chair
the other on the floor; his
knees a closed kappa of denial -

An arabesque of smoke and hair
ranks around his head to keep imaginings
inside. He wears no label,
just watching
explains his presence.

We know anything mundane
would repulse him; we leave him
to meander in his cold-shadowed glen,
a vale of neither laughter nor tears.

While nobody's looking,
and attention is diverted
by something trivial he said,
he will put on a hat
and walk through the wall,

taking a gun
to shoot a snake.

LOST BEFORE NOT ONE

for Stephen Watson

lost before not one
word past between us lost
before the arguments we'd have
had about some funda
mental aesthetic of poetry
lost in some hypothetical
future passed in baiting each
loaded word from me in
diction or in style you'd hate even
this poem what a load of formalist
garbage you'd say and I'd be lost
for words and while that is my loss
and it's the greater loss for those
you've lossed
it's loss and its loss
is a loss for more than one

MYTH

I.

A very long time ago very far away
there was a nymph so beautiful
with skin so like celluloid and eyes so like violets
and fingers that sparkled with such big diamonds
that she was called Liz. Untouchable and rare, she whispered
everywhere she went; even when she screamed, she whispered.
And men went mad
with desire wherever they saw
her celluloid skin, her violet eyes, whenever they heard
her whispered fricatives, t's and d's pronounced
with her hard little tongue set behind her hard little teeth;
those porcelain teeth translucent as longing, shiny as steel.

II.

And the goddesses and demigoddesses and muses and graces
coveted her beauty.
And the demigods lost their turgid erections in awe
and the centaurs wanted to lick her toes
and satyrs kept their distance for fear of her basilisk tongue.
And the gods decided
If we can't seduce her like Alcmena or Leda by metamorphosis
we'll transmute her. We'll flatten her and trap her
in two dimensions, and Styx's musicians'
sweet hymns will accompany her tread,
and the envious graces shall be vexed: they shall
tear their hair and stamp their pretty feet whenever they see her
Flat Perfection.

III.

And the gods made it so, and it was good, and they called their creation
Elizabeth Taylor.

IV.

And the satyrs and centaurs and demigods wept in such an unmanly way
from longing and desire for this inaccessible nymph. And those that came close
were burned, and asked

Who is the demigod strong and brave enough to test this two-dimensional cage
In which our lovely idol is trapped? And some tried.

V.

And one tried twice.

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LUCIAN FREUD - FINISHED

A new sitter: Amy Winehouse, a recent arrival,
is naked but for a public-school tie,
available to pose indefinitely.

At her feet a weasel's coiled sleeping and her
thin fingers clasp the neck of a bottle –
her nails, lacquered cerise, dent the heel of her palm slightly.
And this is where he starts in earnest.

The temptation to begin
with piled and black exactitude
pops the bubble's surface –
he chooses to start here.

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THE SANDPIPERS

Shiny black vinyl on a spindle
twists and crackles,
spewing out a crunch
thirty-three-and-a-third
times a minute
where a grey welt
in the black spectral sheen
provides percussive accompaniment
to voices through fog

and one man's son
stares at the label
going round and round
mesmerised
listening for that special sound
between vamp and shush
that says
'This is what lies in there,
behind the seam,
in the vault.
This is the mystery
of all that it is.'

II.

CHARM AND STRANGE

BYRON AT THESSALONIKI

Through the side-on blind vulva of my left eye
I give birth to unhappy youths. Gestation period,
around two hundred and sixty months, varies.
These youths are born
into perpetual pubescence,
always something dropping, flowering, moistening,
politely hirsute,
and pliable, the sapling stripling heartwood
green.

Unlike certain mammals
I do not eat placenta,
but serve it up in thin slices to the child,
bit by bit, surprised myself at how long
it keeps. I tell them it is chocolate, sweetened
golden caca of the gods, and they believe.
Oh, they believe.

They believe they want me to take them
in truckstop restrooms, all orifices one,
tight as little sonnets,
my prophet's octocock insatiable and theirs alone.
They believe, hermaphrodites, in my intelligence
my talent and above all in my manner, and they crave,
they crave the suckling juices, the glutamate drips
of my approval, my esteem, my deign, my high regard.

The umbilicus is inseverable,
and it remains, tough desiccated kelp,
hardening in the sun and wind so that at last
even sand-flies decline
their interest and move on
to more palatable sherds of medusae
ripped up by the waves. Excited

by pink sunsets, fountains, and moths and rocks and trees,
my grandiose midgets flatten slowly down to two dimensions,
their knees rawn ragged from their hellbent pilgrimages
up and down the staircase, exposing eventually
bone, the opalescent patella moonrise of their want.

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STALKER

I've set the bane, I've brewed the lime
I've even melted paper in my hand;
I've nursed the bruise and honeyed eye,
so come, slippered stalker, come soft.

You've plucked the hare and shaved the squab,
you've baked pale sulphur flowers in your pit,
you've swallowed dice and thrown the pot,
so come, slippered stalker, come soft.

Come soft, and let your dusty trail
forget where you have been,
come soft, on slippers of regret,
and leave your musky bed –
Your date with time has just begun:
we're not quite finished yet.

INKLING OF THE 23RD

Your needy machinery, jointed, clanking,
grinding out its minced product
through hardened years and tempered blades,
takes up the space of a weekend.

It processes merciless second-by-second,
unstoppable, those minutes of ours,
with the prescience of no emergency off-switch,
chewing through each clock-

tick from floor to beam,
every gap filled with hissing steam.
And at the produce-end I find
compacted meaty strings, mixed in:
the gristle of a silent scream.

Then mount me, $f(x)$ me, and
risk a lonesome apotheohypothesis
as we approach a common perpendicular
in parable and hyperbole:
Measure The Spaces In Between:

Will we reach an asymptote

or will we tend to Infinity
as One,
My Love?

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THE PARTICLE IN WHICH SCHRÖDINGER'S CAT IS ADOPTED BY GLORIA SWANSON

"...it is easier to feel convinced that it must be fallacious than it is to find out precisely where the fallacy lies." - Bertrand Russell on the ontological argument for the existence of God.

"It is easier to describe the failings of a work of art than it is its felicities." – Ingrid de Kock (verbal conversation).

"Is 'property' a *property* of Property?"

she asks, scooping up the undead animal and Mae

Westlike patting it shoulder shoulder tummy tummy rump rump.

But she having not yet made the transition to talkies

we only see her lips move and the intercaption reads

rather gothically in flickering script:

"Oh! What a darling little pussy! I shall take it home!"

At this point

while Eisenstein appreciates the montage

Einstein interjects with a sharp

"You can't - it's only a thought experiment,

reductio ad absurdum!"

(but of course she can't

hear him, she's far away in Heisenberg)

(and observably, certainly, dead)

and Anselm of Canterbury shifts uncomfortably in his seat,

making the springs creak.

Ever the stenographer,
Alan Turing (by now chemically castrated), merely notes
the superposition of states and moves on to wonder
if he really was not perhaps a reincarnation of

Ada Lovelace, simultaneously Byron's daughter
and his daughter's cousin.

In the resulting entanglement

Richard Dawkins squeals "Fire!"

and the waveform collapses into yet another poem.

But its impulse weaves as wave to the next.

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ENIGMA - THE NEW RELEASE OF ALAN TURING

Declared fit by the English at one hundred
for public exposure, no fear that his crack
might show on the perambulatory,

the code-breaker, unbroken
may be presented, uncloven,

the injunction only to break
one code at a time: so
frightfully good of him
to stick to it.

And now we can show off his
pretty Q's and equalses,
assured that nowhere hidden
in those cryptic shadows
lies the like of that cipher:

sodomite.

STROBOSCOPE

In the bus we are sitting high
on our thrones of anonymity
and as it passes places
we are voyeurs who steal from our better instincts
the occasional glance herethere.

And as we pass the Varsity swimming pool eyes turn.
Though the hour early still it's hot and we gaze drily
at the clear blue water flashing by
in zoetrope through vertical bars of concrete fence and there
we expect to see childrens' lamelled laughter
paddling, splashing.

But it's a weekday, and as I said,
the hour is early.

And so the louvered view we get is just
deintertlaced azure rectangles on green grass,
at right angles: solitary blue towel and lonely pool.

But where's the swimmer?
It takes a while
to recognise in contrapuntal style
a dark form perpendicular
to the pool's long edge, against the grain of lanes.

Marked out in black, in long black shorts
cleaving to his skin, hips to shin.
He's face down and in the flash he is immobile.
We cannot tell if he's swimming
the breadth of the pool.

We breathe for him
and once the bus has passed by
we're bound
to decide for ourselves
or wait for tomorrow's papers to find out
if he's drowned.

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ENCEPHALAGIC AURA – THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

It flutters near
on splinted wings
populated by sliding hexagonal scales
at the scale of a radio-telescope array or only
indecisive and flitting as the lenticulae of red monarchs
that graze the edge of summer's spring
but yet, as it spirals closer
to the candle-flame between my eyes
focused to a beam so smart and tight
I hear the drone of pulsars,
a deeper space's inarticulate things
and just muscle is the pylon
immobile in a hurricane,
the hyperdata storm of pings
from the corona of a temperamental star.

III.

BINNEDEUR

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caged pigeon post
birds on invisible wires
carrying my Tweets

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ON THE PAGE

on the page a daughter
of reason the germ of an hagiography
a sentence passed
and aching present
no more than a legal clause
or less than a lyric ode
but in it all the high suffering
of the dot-dot-dash in a line of code

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TRANSLATION OF A POEM THAT DOESN'T (QUITE) EXIST YET

Set in Chicago, in a shady square
where trees glower and the clouds are scowling,
this poem describes in dactyls three
a game of Solitaire
between Susan Sontag and Paul Valéry.
The Arbiter is, of course, Finuala Dowling;
the Puppeteer is Baudelaire.

- 'But what's at stake?' we ask, and 'Is it fair?'
as each player's men are replaced by holes:
- Abstraction's place in poesy,
in verse, ballade, or air.
The match goes on, advantage: none.
The Arbiter bows out from her role...
Another game of Solitaire.

The winner: Baudelaire.

#OCCUPYPOETRY.ORG

We are the 1%,
the elite,
who feel the chill drip
of the one cent that trickles
mercury from the publisher
who deigns to justify
the printing of something that gives a thrill
from the capital of words.

We are the 1% who pitch our tents in silence
outside stacked megaliths
of self-help platitudes,
and the occasional collection
of dosh people read out at funerals.

We are the 1%
standing quietly
before the forests of glass and steel
holding up a tiny shard of diamond,
hoping it might catch the sun.

DISILLUSIONMENT

(a bruise on)
this
(otherwise perfect springtime)
apple
 kissed by the subsidized California sun
 machine-plucked from the tree
 stuffed in magnificent packaging
 transported across the rock of continent and the schism of Atlantic and equator
 placed in romantic context of glorious snakelike fake straw
 (to tempt,
 as Medusa, Eve,
 into a descent to immobility or knowledge -
 in short: Hell)
on its refrigerated shelf
repels

MIDDEN

Step softly here;
here's a midden –
cloaca of an epoch, yes,
here at Sandy Bay where just a little further
along the track
coverings are shucked from muscles
and discarded, where bottletops, and bluebottles
blue, red, mosaic the sand,
and stranded shopping bags puff yellow
to warn of their barbed sting.

Yes, here's a midden; these bleached packages
from no low-fat tin-canned oystercatcher's snack
or seal's idle sunbaked breakfast, no –
here's where actual people came
and hunkered, chucking over their shoulders
deliberately, a civilised talus. Here's
where before whitening
shells landed and sloughed with pre-Xhosa clicks,
with voiceless alveolar lateral fricatives,
here, before Llandudno.

QUATRAIN KU

A single Flanders poppy, self-sown in the lawn,
unmown; a Santa-hat hawked on the blackened street;
a Coca-Cola sign, the tearing of a train through dawn -
Violence in Africa: the wounds pricked out in heat.

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NATURE MORTE

xileem uitgeëts

weefsel word 'n seildoek

gedroogte dinge

vrydag-huldeblyk

sewentien lettergrepe

geur van Castelyn

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GOD IS IN YOUR TYPEWRITER

for Anne Sexton

A sexton is a gravedigger,
by Shakespeare rude and relegated
to prose. A sexton
is a bellringer, but the womb
is not a clock nor a bell
tolling*; a uterus is not a grave,
nor a confessional polished lovingly
by the sexton, no dust
on any perforation in the screen,
(every probing father I have sinned must come out clean)
digging with his
fingers for any taint
that might show promise
however faint
of one speck
of gracile veiling tissue,
one trailing telltale string
of words that may with grave intent
lie finally at rest.

*from Anne Sexton: 'Menstruation at Forty'

CODA

The lavender bush had not been cut back in at least
twelve years. Committed to the task I hacked
drunk on its rank verdigris scent and my sudden labile will.

I started at the bottom, where blackened branches
brushed the paving stones and rotten twigs
lay hiding in the smell of sweet decay.
Hardened-woody, half-live branches struggled, but succumbed
to my secateurs, and the pile of detritus grew, and then
in a corner of my nose I caught a glimpse of something

new, not fitting with the hues of purple loam -

a something animal, a something tailed and furry: a colon
in the pressing sentence of my garden-clearing need,
a whiff of mouseshit. I stood and felt the tightening skin
where blisters were forming on my hands and I arched my starting
to ache back and acknowledged the acid feel of stiffening thighs
and knees.

A mouse's home was here. Here in the dross
of a shaggy camphoraceous foreign plant,
far from the limestone of Provence, pomanders,
or an accompaniment to roast lamb. A mouse's home was here,
and the disappearance of this overweening bush,
of this uncompromising, awkward nuisance
from my garden; the loss of this silent blot that
attracted bees and made the evening redolent
meant the loss of a terrified creature's known world.

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WINGED COUSIN

In broad daylight, you come to me and say
There's a dead bat in the bedroom, with the subtext of

Will I do the manly thing and get rid of it
And accustomed to ejecting spiders and Parktown prawns

I go and investigate. Smaller than I expected and flat
its wings folded one quarter out it lies and presents

five triangles, furred and
leathered and - a complement to the carpet - absolute.

And still. Benevolent, armed with dustpan and with broom
I sweep the creature up with the careless, silent respect

that comes from knowledge of death, noting that its
texture beneath the broom's bristles is altogether

different from that of the carpet, stickier but smoother at
the same time. I'm reverently conscious that this is a

sample of the only mammal that can truly fly; my winged
cousin. I head for the garden intent on graceful

burial or at least decomposition in the woodpile but then
it shifts a wing against the dustpan's plastic and I

decide it's still alive.

A change of plan: A dark but pretty spot where it can sleep
or die - under a rosebush, perhaps. I carry what is suddenly

a fragile foetus of possibility more diligently now,
aware of the renewal of an aerial faith in its

fissile soul. Too quickly in my haste to dispatch
the vulnerable animal into its thorny harbour I

drop it on the grass. It does not move but clings
to the lawn, it claws to the living grass - a poke:

it will not budge, uncertain of any direction, forward
upward, to light to dark to life to death. Undecided, I can only

leave it to its indecision. That evening as we drink sundowners
on the patio the rosebushes emit faint trills of clicks.

And the next morning it is gone.

FOSSIL SONG

In an icy cobalt murk
accepting only half the warmth
or colour of the fertile time
the coelacanth encrypts itself,
shifting into or out of dilapidation:
a mounted ammoniac singing bass
with a laboured sine of final tail
and heavy rock-blotched scales.

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THE SOOTHSAYER

The smooth soothsayer
smiles a grin too shiny,
pokes the sticky entrails
of a dove splayed on the table
dripping blood on floor.

Gizzard, crop, heart, liver,
each flopping over the other under
its own dead weight
with a splodgy sound:
verisimilitude
coaxed from the beast's untucked
organs: lung and syrinx.

And after he has finished, the diviner
wipes hands down tunic,
leaving trails of red truth
that he will walk away with.

But not before he blinds us
once again
with his sparkly teeth.

A JUDITH MASON BESTIARY

“To use animals thus is not to degrade but to dignify them. Their unselfconscious vitality is transmuted into metaphor and all creative thinking is simply the pursuit of metaphors to describe the indescribable.” – Judith Mason

The mere idea
tangled in the strings of its own craft and a
fly
(captured in a net of buckminsterfullerene-chicken-wire)
here
a startled jackal rendered in detail
there almost unnoticed
its tale on fire a bending
crucifix a coalition
of wood plastic porcelain conspiring to be paint
to excel Dante in synecdoche to dart
furtively across a symbol and to hide it
as artefact of its own creation.



Judith Mason, *Misty Field at Daljosaphat* (1998)

Oil on board

Photo credit: untraceable

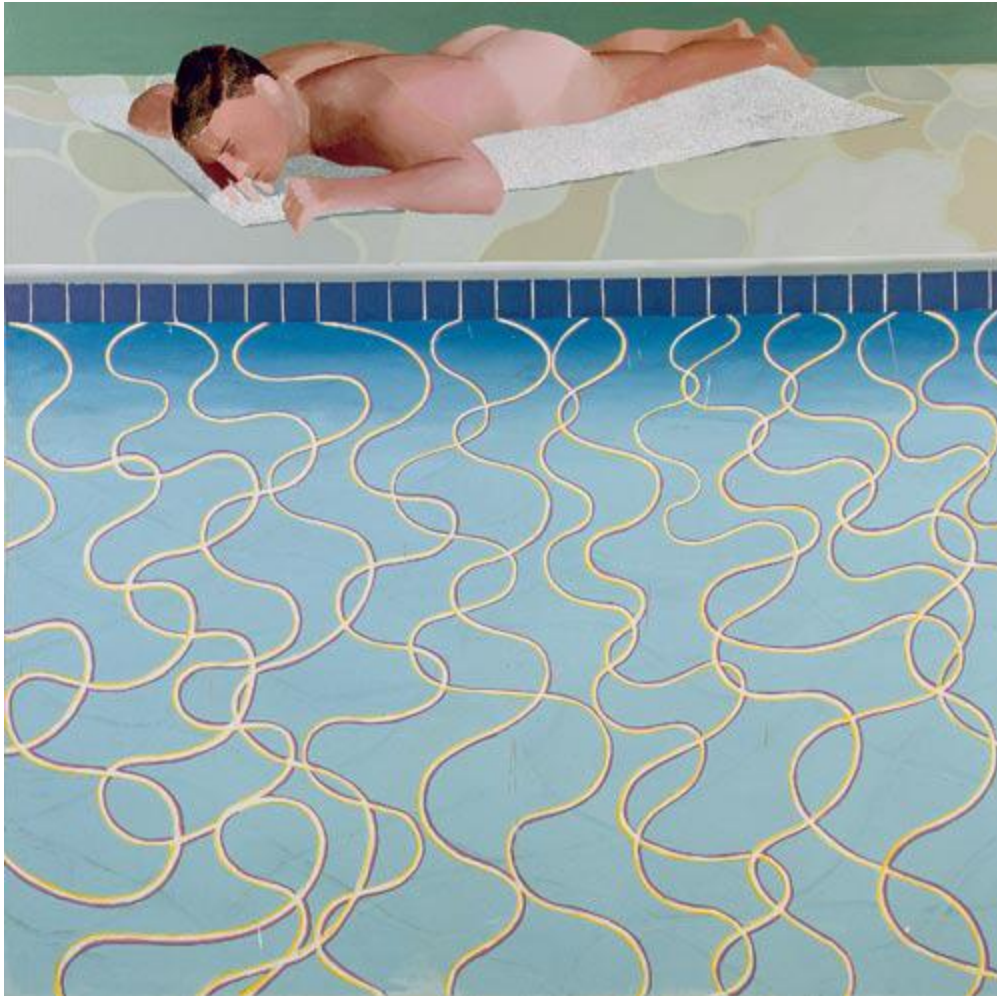
Image source: <http://www.judithmason.com/paintings/images/30b.jpg> (accessed 14 August 2012)

NARCISSUS WITH HOCKNEY

I indulge vanity
as I cosset flat white ribbons separating
muscle from the element,
admiring shy blue veins and redly mirrored throb

as Narcissus surely drank in
the advancing pallor of his skin

all the while pretending
to notice only how his hair fell in an aching curve
until it touched the surface
of the pool.



David Hockney, *Sunbather* (1966)

Acrylic on canvas

Ludwig Museum, Cologne, Germany

Photo credit: untraceable.

Image source: http://www.museenkoeln.de/medien/mlk/Hockney_David.jpg (accessed 14 August 2012)

A VISIT TO THE WORD

for D.J. Opperman, dolosgooier van die woord

Words are laid out
like corpses in the dictionary,
among steel cabinets misted with sweat
condensed from the collective
effort of staying dead.

The reaper's cutlery rattles again
and clanks as if we're passing by
a sealed Sunday house where lunch's almost done,
and unseen family scrapes its last obese
tracks of gravy from shiny glaze of plate
and licks its knives
with wet red tongues.

Cut off from its breathless meaning
and icing up, the Word lies, waiting -
lips too scarlet -
for us to identify it for what it was,
to say our last goodbye, adieu,
and commit it to the crawl
of tired things merely useful:
a tape, a rusted scythe,
a concrete dolos on the beach.

FATA MORGANA

Our sea is a rough mistress,
her quiet is deceptive, her manners
untaught, fraught with temper, wild,
and now precious in this late light
when in a brief evening clutch of calm
with the wind she slips into
a haze of near-grey silence, just lapping
her wetsalt tongue
at our boat,
a mote, a molecule
on her grand meniscus.

And then suddenly as if rent, wrested from the horizon,
a ship appears before us upside-down
and splendid in shimmering furl
before
she stretches and heaves her curves over
in the wind's arms.
And, leading with a languid hand to douse
the light,
she yawns.

A FASCINATOR

I

Not so much a poetic sequence
as putting the uld back
into Muldoon, the mulled-
berry whine that chimes
hither on a zither,
pulling the cock out of de Kok
while Isobel takes the in out of
Dickinson (because I could not brake –)

II

For death's another of those
tired old chips, pissed on
by the battery-hens. The gambler,
aces down as jealous (because
somebody put his cock in Isobel)
ran the gauntlet of the mulberry
wine
down to the old crick.

III

Where Watson's Elementary School
(Private, of course) offered courses
(seven in total) on the zither,
the frets of which are strutted
by de Kok.

IV

For death's another of those
tired auld cocks, fretting
over his battery-operated hens. The wine-
muller in his grid of struts was closer
than Isobel to a bicycle,
but further yet
from the old creek.

V

Down, down as light
as the feathers on electric cheques
zithered by the breeze
that makes the branches creak,

VI

For death's another of those
tired old crocks, and someone's son
put a dick in Isobel, the clocks
chimed seven, seven times –
the Break. For death's another of those
fretted struts – the chips are down

dear Watson.

GOD, REDUX

I. GENESIS

I learned about God from my sister,

and, older than me, she learned about God
at school. On the freshly split slate of my four-year old mind
her authoritative stylus squeakscratched the outlines of terror:

God was an overblown, pointing, reclining blond Kouros,
to whom one was required to sing
mondegreens of threakings of orrey and tar
with the arrogant omniscience of youth

she said God was a twisted lady whose eyes
were blank-staring hollows in a pillow of salt
as tempting to lick as an Oxo-cube wrapper;
tumbled in chunks of concrete untidily – Jericho
rotted in our crackling white veld; God was
the great rotary furnace of the steel factory at Dunswart
on the road to Benoni;

God was not Venus' twinkling at dusk
through a layer of mine-dump dust
I learned about God from my mother's Bible,
where God was a tiny font regimented
onto paper so thin it was almost transparent,
except where the book fell open
at shiny-tough hypertint prints:
of the long-haired transvestite good shepherd, mild-faced

to the vanishing-point of blandness;
the mystery of sex in the tanned quadricep ripples
of Goliath and Bathsheba's strawberry-Nesquik nipples.

My naughty scrawlings in crayon on those compact pages?
My own revelation, my naive intention
to redraw, rewrite God as He was
before His invention.

II. EXODUS

And then as a pre-pubescent youth
staring at the blank screen
of a Sunday morning and my hand
responding to the iron-clad surge
from beneath the duvet
I learned
that God resided
in my frenulum.

III. NUMBERS

John (my imaginary friend,
he who knew the words unknown and had
the admirable confidence and competence
desired by girls - Samson-chased -
he) told me:

The Word was god
no more. The word was no more god
than the word god. The word
(π , cotangent, Σ , sixteen, 440Hz, profit statement)
no more reducible to syntax
than calculus, and so before I entered
the promised land of
shaving and exponent x ,
God and The Absent Law had to spend
a spell in the wilderness.

IV. APOCRYPHA OF (T)RUTH(LESS/NESS)

God | ~woman
a slippery
scale | serpent-cast(e),
unreachable, unspoken, unsaid,
calling (m)other
un
derstanding,
branching
to a
turgid wishbone | tree of knowledge
binary: Binah, hairy
c(un)t, hym/e/n
split
on the Eve of enlightenment
("He's blind in his left eye!")
no name for not-a-thing
not-
(t)her(/e)
wanted
found
| wanting
[Saint] An(ne)other
holy, wholly, whole-ly holey
LilithAvilaGalaGaiaDelilahDevourah

V. PFALM

spou wenotle ireprimi des
pastref mdarugha fesi res
quarace burisze playoi
fesis juldadoi
gngn hahut gngn hah
ught gngn gngn ta
'a

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NOTES TO THE POEMS

Page 7: The poet Izak van der Merwe, better known as Boerneef, wrote for Cecil Higgs:

Jy het my werkvertrek die ene see laat word
met kleur en klank en rots en Onrussee
nog kleur en see en rots en nog en nog
en langs die seekant voorjaarspienkengeel
jy is 'n begenadigde jy vul my huis
met rykdom vir die oog en vir die hart
genot wat elke dag opnuut begin

Botha, Amanda, 2012. Boerneef, 'kunsliëfhê-er' in *Rapport*, 16 March 2012

<http://www.rapport.co.za/Weekliks/Nuus/Boerneef-kunsliëfhe-er-20120316> (accessed 19 August 2012)

Page 9: Marfan Syndrome is a genetic connective tissue disorder that causes inelasticity and hyperextensibility of ligaments and tendons. Among other symptoms, sufferers have long, narrow bones, large eyes, heart arrhythmias, scoliosis, and cataracts. In an effort to correct her scoliosis, Sitwell was forced to wear an iron corset until adulthood.

Page 12: Pasternak, B. 'Gamlyet' ('*Hamlet*') in Obolensky, D., 1962. *The Heritage of Russian Verse*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, p.335. The translation is this poet's own.

Page 42: "he feels he's finished when he gets the impression he's working on somebody else's painting" <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3668104/Lucian-Freud-marathon-man.html> (accessed 14 August 2012)

Page 19: In quantum physics 'charm' and 'strange' are two of the six flavours of quarks (subatomic particles), the others being 'up' and 'down', and 'top' and 'bottom'.

Page 20: Augusta Ada King (nee Byron), Countess of Lovelace and daughter of Lord Byron, was a mathematician who wrote the first computer program, for Charles Babbage's analytical

engine. Her mother, Annabella Milbanke, was the cousin of Lady Caroline Lamb, with whom Byron had had an affair.

Page 24: Hyperbolic paraboloid plane: In mathematical topography, a saddle-shaped structure denoted by the formula " $\Omega < 1$ ". A 'common perpendicular' is a property of parallel lines.

Page 28: The papers on codebreaking by Alan Turing (1912 - 1954), recognised as the father of artificial intelligence and breaker of the Enigma code in WWII, were finally released by CGHQ in April 2012, one hundred years after his birth (see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-17771962>, accessed 14 August 2012). A 2011 petition, requesting the British Government to pardon Turing for his conviction of gross indecency, was declined.

Page 38: Voiceless alveolar lateral fricative: A phoneme represented in Bantu languages by *hl* and in Welsh by *ll*. This poem owes a debt to Frank Kermode ('The Sense of an Ending') and to Paul Muldoon (*Maggot*).

Page 48: Quotation from 'A Prospect of Icons; Some reflections on the use of religious imagery in painting.' (1973) in Charlton J. et al. ed. (2008). *Judith Mason: A Prospect of Icons* (Exhibition catalogue). Johannesburg: Standard Bank.

Page 52: Fata Morgana refers simultaneously to the Arthurian legend of the treacherous Morgan le Fay, and to the optical illusion at sea of a boat floating above the horizon, upside-down. It is traditionally seen by sailors as a bad omen, and most likely gave rise to the legend of the Flying Dutchman.